

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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AT THE MOMENT OF VICTORY.

By C. L. PIRKIS.

Author of "A Dateless Bargain," etc.

CHAPTER IV.

"How can you let him make himself so ridiculous?" asked Madge of Lance, after dinner that night, as together they stood at one of the long drawing-room windows, watching the crimson after-glow fade from the cloud-mountains in the sky, and the night-blue slowly spreading athwart the valley.

"Him! Who, what?" asked Lance, starting as if suddenly aroused from a reverie.

"Why, Sir Peter, of course. Why did you let him bring an utter stranger into the house in this way? A word from you would often prevent these foolish things, yet you never speak that word," she said.

She spoke in low tones. That drawing-room owned to four windows and three doors, and there was no knowing but what Sir Peter might enter by one of them at any moment.

Lance shook himself free from his thoughts.

"Now I like that, Madge," he began, laughingly. "You know Uncle Peter as well as I do—when once he has taken a notion into his head, not the Lords, and the Commons, and the whole bench of Bishops combined, would prevent him carrying it out."

It seemed as if the mantle of Lady Judith had temporarily fallen upon Madge's shoulders—she was not to be mollified. Lance's laugh, too, did not mend matters.

"It would be bad enough," she went on, "if you stood by and said nothing; but

when you absolutely carry him off to the scene of a railway accident for the whole and sole purpose of——"

"Giving him something to do," finished Lance. "My dear Madge, I wonder how many times in your life you have said to me, 'Give him something to do or he'll drive us all mad.'"

"Yes, but not such a something as this. If you must bring people into the house, bring men whom you can entertain, not women who will be left on our hands."

Lance eyed her curiously. Madge seemed more disturbed than so trifling an incident warranted.

Again he tried to laugh the matter off. "You don't mean to say that you're hard-hearted enough to wish that we had left this poor girl to sleep at the railway station? You know there's not an inn even at Lower Upton at which a lady could put up."

"Why didn't she go on with the other passengers to Carstairs? There were more people than she, I expect, who came down by her train."

"She hadn't made up her mind what to do when Uncle Peter and I drove up on the look-out for——"

"Forlorn, beautiful young women," finished Madge sarcastically.

"Exactly. And finding what we went out to seek, what could we do but——"

"She is not beautiful," interrupted Madge vehemently. "Her face has a history written on it, and it is not a good one."

But even as she said the words the thought in her heart was: "I would give all the Cohen diamonds and every penny I have in the world to have such a face."

Lance put on a serio-comic expression.

"Ah! every one knows, Madge, that you never mean one half you say," he said,

as thoroughly bent on teasing as if he were a schoolboy and Madge a screaming refractory parrot.

"I mean every word I say; and, I repeat, her face is an evil one and repulses me. Somehow it makes me think of midnight bridges and dark rivers, and——"

But at this moment a door opened, and Sir Peter entered. He stood for a moment looking about him.

There was Lady Judith, asleep in a low chair, her head thrown back, her big fan drooping from her hand, her face crimson as usual. Evidently she had fanned herself into the arms of Morpheus. There were Madge and Lance whispering together in the window recess, for all the world like a pair of lovers.

"Delightful!" thought the kind-hearted old gentleman. "Just as it should be! Capital match! Most suitable in every way!"

And as he could not bring himself to interrupt the love-making of the young people, he crossed the room on tip-toes and went out by the opposite door.

Madge seemed instinctively conscious of Sir Peter's thoughts.

"Why did he run away like that?" she queried, plucking nervously at the posy of yellow roses which she wore in her waist-band.

"He will be back again in another minute," said Lance composedly.

And sure enough back again he came.

This time through the window, the third from the one at which Lance and Madge were standing.

"Don't disturb yourselves," he said, standing in front of the two and falling into a backward and forward heel and toe motion he frequently adopted, and which suggested the idea that he had suddenly been put upon rockers. "Don't disturb yourselves. I only came in for a moment to say that——"

He paused abruptly. Honestly he had nothing to say. If he had spoken out his thoughts he would have said: "The house is horribly still; it's time I set some one or something stirring."

"That it was a fine evening," suggested Lance.

"Ah, yes, a fine evening! That was it. And—and it was a disappointment our guest couldn't sit down to dinner with us." This was a sudden thought and he jumped at it.

Madge here plucked so viciously at her roses that two or three fell to the ground.

Lance picked them up and presented them to her in the most lover-like attitude he could command.

Sir Peter smiled benignly on him. "Ah, 'gather your rosebuds while ye may.' You know what the old song says, eh?" Here he gave Lance a sly little dig in the ribs, and forthwith vanished by another window.

Madge turned sharply upon Lance. "Why do you do it?" she queried hotly. "Why do you make believe and make him think that—that——"

"That—that——" mimicked Lance. "My dear Madge, all my telling in the world wouldn't convince Uncle Peter that we were not desperately in love with each other. You try your hand at telling him and see what will come of it."

"You tell him things as if you didn't mean them—you ought to—to make him understand that—that——" again she broke off, and again Lance mimicked her.

"That—that you haven't the faintest liking in the world for me, that, perhaps, you may marry a chimney-sweep to-morrow; but Lance Clive—never. Well, I'll do my best to make him understand."

"I never said such a thing; you've no right to put words into my mouth," she cried vehemently; and then, as if fearful of losing her self-control, she half-hid her face in her yellow roses, and left the room.

"If things could only have been different five years ago!" she said to herself as she closed the door behind her. "If I had but been free, as other girls, to choose or to refuse!"

CHAPTER V.

LANCE remained standing at the open window. A half-amused expression flitted across his face.

"How ridiculous of Madge," he thought, "to lose her temper over a girl she has only seen once in her life, and whom most probably after to-morrow she'll never see again!"

Presently the half-amused expression on his face gave way to a more thoughtful look.

"In spite of her 'No,' six months ago," he thought, "I believe she has a faint liking for me. I wonder if I asked her a second time what answer I should get!"

The wonder was one to entertain, not to dismiss as a passing thought. So, with a glance at the still peacefully-sleeping Lady Judith, Lance took his cigar-case out of

his pocket and strolled through the French window on to the outside terrace. The evening air was cool and balmy. The garden showed weird and mysterious under the long night-shadows which were beginning to troop forth from beneath the trees and castle walls.

Lance went strolling in leisurely fashion along the dim paths, his thoughts as serene and limpid as the dark stretch of summer sky overhead. It did not require the miserable rushlight of a young man's vanity, nor that stronger light which experience of women's ways gives, to read clearly Madge's apparently capricious conduct, when once a steady attention was accorded to it. She would be wooed for herself, not for her wealth; wooed, too, in downright passionate earnest, not by a lukewarm suitor edged on by a lively guardian. This was what her alternate sweetness and sourness, her petulance and playfulness meant if they meant anything at all.

And, after all, so Lance's thoughts went, there was no reason why Madge should not be thus wooed. Hers was a sweet and attractive personality when once one had learnt to pierce that outer armour of caprice wherewith temperaments like hers, rendered supersensitive by circumstances, so frequently clothe themselves.

When Sir Peter had brought her, a shy little maiden of twelve, to Upton Castle, Lance had made a fine pet and plaything of her. Later on, as she developed into the girl in her teens, he had been honestly in love with her. Later on still, when Sir Peter had taken her future in hand and considered he had done a thoroughly good day's work in marrying her to old David Cohen, Lance had seen fit to indulge in the bitterness of a rejected suitor, and to anathematise her for a heartless flirt, although at the same time he had gone out of his way to convince "Uncle Punch and Aunt Judy," and all the world beside, that he and Madge had never been more than brother and sister to each other. During Madge's short married life he had seen next to nothing of her; but when on the death of her husband she shut up her town house, let her country house, and came back to the home of her girlhood, he was willing enough to listen to Sir Peter's suggestion that "he and Madge were made for each other," and to do his best to obliterate from his recollection that short period of her wedded life.

Thinking over his offer of marriage now in this dreamy half-light, he said to himself that he did not wonder at the impetuous "No" it had received, considering what a small amount of energy he had displayed in the making of it. Doubtless it would have met with a different reception if Sir Peter had left him alone to make it in his own fashion, instead of jogging his elbow, as it were, morning, noon, and night, to do at a rush a thing which could have been far better accomplished by successive steps.

Lance finished his cigar, but still lingered out there among the shadows and heavy flower-scents, indulging now in this pleasant thought, now in that. The Castle grounds wound downwards with many a steep pathway right into the valley, where, among the stalwart pines and drooping larches, stood the keeper's cottage and the home farm. It occurred to him that there was something he particularly wished to say to the gamekeeper about a bit of land which was to be enclosed for cover that year, so, in spite of the growing dark, he decided to make his way down to the cottage at once, lest to-morrow's occupations might once more sweep the matter from his mind.

The shadows closed around him as he descended the incline. Behind him lights were beginning to show in the Castle frontage through its trellis-screen of sycamore and cedar. Overhead the smirched grey of twilight had given place to the sapphire-blue of a night sky pierced with a hundred thousand "star windows to let out heaven's light." His downward path showed grey in front of him, dimly tessellated with the faint shadows of the planes and wild plum-trees which grew at intervals on either side. Then for a brief distance the path wound upward again, with a wood on one side, and a high hedge on the other. Beyond this hedge a bare, brown upland rose, treeless, and shadowless.

A gap in the hedge, where the last hunt had ridden through, framed for Lance a bird's-eye view of this sterile waste. It showed him something else beside the dry stunted turf and a few scurrying rabbits—the figure of a woman sharply outlined against the night-sky. She half-sat, half-crouched, with arms encircling her knees. She wore no hat, her hair was tightly coiled about her head, her face was upturned to the heavens.

Lance was neither poet nor painter, but nevertheless the weirdness and mystic

beauty of the scene made itself felt. That crouching attitude, the wildly desolate surroundings, seemed to transport him straight from the Cumberland hillsides to classic ground, peopled with the queen-prophetesses of ancient myth. If the woman had suddenly tossed her arms on high, and burst into some wild invocation, it would have seemed all in keeping with the ghostly scene.

But she did nothing of the sort. Instead, as if conscious of his presence, she suddenly turned her face towards him. Then Lance in utter amazement recognised, by the light of the stars, the pallid face and jet-black hair of Miss Jane Shore.

He was through the hedge in a moment, and in another was standing beside her on the shadowless waste.

"Miss Shore!" he exclaimed. "What are you—can you be doing out here at this time of night?"

The girl did not start nor move from her crouching attitude. For one instant her large grey eyes were lifted to his face with a hunted, forlorn look in them which made his heart ache for her.

"Looking at the stars," she answered dreamily, absently. Then she let her gaze sweep the sky once more.

There was no moon; the bare upland on which they stood showed, in the half light made by the summer sky and myriad stars, a ghostly patch from out the surrounding gloom of dense hedges and denser woods. The girl's upturned face seemed more like some marble mask than a thing which had life and could redden and smile; the black sweep of hair across her forehead heightened its pallor into an almost death-like whiteness, while the grey garments which clung to her showed like so much dim shroud-like vapour from which she was just emerging.

An artist seeking an impersonation of a fallen star, looking upward to its lost place in the heavens, might have found his ideal realised here.

Lance, in his young robust flesh and blood, felt himself in some sort out of keeping with his surroundings.

For a moment he felt tongue-tied; then, as if to break a spell, he spoke:

"If you are fond of star-gazing," he said, "you ought to go to St. Cuthbert's churchyard—it stands on a promontory—you can get a splendid view of the heavens there, right away over the Irish sea."

Treeless though this upland was, the expanse of sky it commanded was com-

paratively circumscribed, on one side by the thick wood which stood on yet higher ground, on the other by the majestic crags and headlands of the Cuddaws.

Only the first part of his sentence seemed to catch her ear.

"Fond of star-gazing," she repeated slowly. "Is one fond of gazing on the faces of one's enemies? The stars are my enemies. I hate—hate them."

Lance tried to be comfortable and common-place. "Pardon me," he said, "then why do you come out here with nothing between you and the sky, when you could so easily, by drawing your curtains, shut out the faces of your enemies?"

She answered his question circuitously. "You ask your friend to tell you your fortune; he will say pleasant things to you—he will lie to please you. You ask your enemy; he will speak truth to you—the stars cannot lie."

The effort with which she spoke English was marked in this sentence.

"For all that, or rather in spite of all that, I don't think that I should feel disposed to neglect the society of my friends for that of my enemies," he answered lightly, but feeling all the time that his light words were strangely out of place.

She turned her large luminous eyes full on him. "What if you have no friends to neglect?" she asked coldly, stonily, as one might who had long been accustomed to look the fact in the face.

If Lance had been in his usual frame of mind, words would have come trippingly to his tongue at hearing a handsome young woman thus frankly proclaim her friendlessness. That he stood silently gazing at her for a good minute and a half, showed that he was undergoing a new experience. Her head drooped, her hands lay limply in her lap. Seated thus, she gave him the impression of some one half-stunned by some crushing blow, listless and indifferent whether a second would follow.

"I can hardly credit such a thing," he began hesitatingly.

She did not let him finish his sentence. She rose slowly from her crouching posture. In the dim light her tall figure seemed to elongate itself beyond its real height.

"Look! my star, my fate," she said in the same hard, bitter voice as before.

Lance followed the sweep of her hand to where, under the shadow of the Cuddaw fell, the old Castle dominated the land-

scape. High in the heavens, directly over the topmost peak of the Fell, a planet shone out with brilliant metallic lustre among a thousand stars.

Lance, very hazy in astronomical knowledge, would have liked to ask a thousand questions. What planet was it? Had it a bad character among the planets? And so forth.

But she would not allow one. She drew the hood of her cloak over her head, and so closely round her face that nought but her glittering, forlorn eyes showed beneath it.

"Come, let us go back to the house," she said, "I have seen enough for one night."

SOME BITS OF NORMAN LONDON.

POST-RESTORATION London, by which is meant the London of Queen Anne and the first two Georges, mellowed by the hand of time, may be considered quaint if not picturesque. Jacobean London, if we may judge by the specimens which have descended to us, must have been a mixture of the quaint and the picturesque. Tudor London must have been both magnificent and miserable, with no mean between. Mediæval and Norman London must have been thoroughly magnificent.

Squalor and slums, of course, were grouped around the splendid gateways of the castles and the religious houses; but if records and relics are to be accepted as faithful portraiture of the appearance of the city generally, the splendour and magnificence must have far outshone the squalor and poverty, for the simple reason that between the boundaries of one religious house and those of another, there could have been but little room for squalor and poverty, so numerous were they.

Strange as it may sound, London is, and always has been to all appearances, an essentially ecclesiastical city. There are probably at this time more churches assembled within the boundaries of London Wall than within any other space of equal dimensions in the world; and this plethora of ecclesiastical buildings must have been much more striking in an age when land was comparatively cheap, when there was no necessity to seize upon every available plot of ground for the purpose of running up warehouses, and counting-houses, and shops, and when such houses as did exist had open spaces about them. Before the

Great Fire there were one hundred and thirty-nine churches in London, of which thirteen belonged to religious houses—an enormous number if we consider the space of ground over which the London of 1666 spread; and, in the middle of the fourteenth century, when Roman Catholicism in England was in the full flush of its power and glory, there were no less than thirty distinct and powerful religious houses in London, not inclusive of "cells" and "colleges."

As our business is with Norman London in particular, we have only to do with the nine of these houses which were existing in the year 1108; but we may be allowed to support our characterisation of London as essentially an ecclesiastical city by a brief enumeration of these and the others.

Strange to say, of the richest and most powerful of the old London religious houses the traces are the most scanty. These were, the House of the Canons Regular of Saint Augustine, called Trinity or Christ Church, in Aldgate; Saint Martin le Grand; the Dominican House of the Friars Preachers, generally known as the Black Friars; the Sisterhood of Saint Clare in the Minories; the Abbey of Saint Peter's at Westminster; and Bermondsey Abbey. Scarcely less splendid or powerful were the Bernardine House of the Templars; the House of Saint John of Jerusalem at Clerkenwell, erected as a kind of rival to the foundation of Hugh de Payens by his visitor, the Patriarch Heraclius; the Augustinian Priory of the Holy Trinity at Saint Bartholomew's, Smithfield; the Black Benedictine Nunnery at Clerkenwell; Saint Mary's Priory, Southwark; and Saint Thomas of Acons (Acre). There was also a House of the Brothers of Saint Mary of Mount Carmel, generally known as the White Friars; a Franciscan House of Friars Minors at Christ's Hospital, called the Grey Friars; a House of the Brothers of the Holy Cross, of which the name still lingers in Crutched Friars; Saint Mary's Nunnery in Bishopsgate Without; the Hospitallers of Saint Mary of Bethlehem, who wore the star of Bethlehem on their robes, and whose memory is still kept up in the "Bedlam" Hospital, which occupies the site of the original religious house; the Carthusians were at Charterhouse and Saint Pancras; the Augustinians at Austin Friars; the Brotherhood of Saint Mary and Saint Giles at Cripplegate; the Benedictines at Saint Helen's, Bishopsgate, the House of

Saint Mary of the Mincheons, of which the name survives in Mincing Lane; a Nunnery of the Holy Cross and Saint Helen's; the Hospital of Saint Mary Spittle; a great House of Saint Katharine by the Tower, founded by Edward the Third's Queen, Philippa of Hainault; the House of Saint John the Baptist, Shoreditch; besides houses at Kilburn, Stratford, Lambeth, and Canonbury.

The appearance of these houses with their chapels, their cloisters, their gates, their outbuildings, all reared in that spirit of enthusiasm which made building well and magnificently a duty of conscience; each standing amidst its grounds and pleasaunces, can hardly be imagined as we trudge over and poke about their sites of to-day.

But we must get on to Norman London. Our first duty is to find out which of this mass of houses are clearly Norman, and we find but the nine following: The Templars; the House of Saint John at Clerkenwell; Saint Bartholomew's, Smithfield; Saint Mary's Nunnery, Clerkenwell; Bermondsey Abbey; Saint Mary's, Southwark; Trinity, Aldgate; Saint Thomas of Acons; and Saint Martin le Grand.

Our next duty is to mark of which of these are traces still visible, and the number is reduced to three—the Temple Church; Saint Bartholomew's, Smithfield; and Saint Mary's, Southwark; for, although we shall find Norman traces in other directions, notably at the Tower, and at Westminster, and in Cheapside, the religious houses claim our attention first. The most perfect remains in London of genuine Norman work are to be found in the Church of Saint Bartholomew the Great, Smithfield. That which we view to-day, although a very fair-sized parish church, is but the choir of the ancient building; the disappeared nave extended as far as the beautiful little Pointed arch under the pickle-shop by which we approach the church, as is evident by the remains of pillars on the right-hand side of the pathway; the transepts covering where is now Cloth Fair on the left to Bartholomew Close on the right. However, we know that what has been spared is older than what was pulled down by Sir Richard Rich at the Dissolution; the church showing traces as we move from east to west of that struggle between the Norman and its successor, the Pointed, or Early English style of architecture, which we shall remark elsewhere, and which reminds us of the evidence in the Ducal Palace of Venice, of

a similar struggle between the Lombard and the Arab.

The church was founded in 1128, by Rahere, the astute Augustinian, whose sombre effigy reclines under a delicate canopy of fifteenth century work in the chancel, and contains far more of interest than can come within the limits of a necessarily sketchy paper. However, attention may be drawn to the sturdy, typical pillars, with their plain-cushioned capitals, unrelieved by any of the elaboration and embellishment which marks Norman work of a later period; to the beautiful little apse, over which, till of late, a fringe factory was kept in full and audible working order; to the internal work of what was, or what was intended to have been, the characteristic Norman central tower—in the arches of which the transition from Norman to Pointed is remarkable, two of them being in the former and two in the latter style; to the quadruple triforium arches; and, amongst relics of a later age, to Prior Bolton's window, bearing his rebus of a bolt fixed in a tun, which projects into the church, to the Mildmay tomb, and to the font whereat Hogarth was baptized.

The long-standing drawbacks to the completeness of this relic of old London, the infant school and the blacksmith's forge, which have been permitted by the vandalic indifference of years to occupy actually part of the triforium of the church, still exist; but in September, we hear, their leases expire, and it is sincerely to be hoped that the recent appeals by the Church authorities to the reverential sentiment of all who love their grand old city will result in the acquisition of the space thus put to such incongruous uses.

We search in vain amongst the alleys and back slums of Cloth Fair and Bartholomew Close—the last remnant of the old priory close, and long famous for its mulberry trees—for some trace of cloister or gate.

The result is not to be wondered at when we remember that the soil of London has been raised at least twelve feet since the Great Fire. An exploration of Cloth Fair cellars might reveal something, but our experience of Cloth Fair above ground inclines us to leave subterranean Cloth Fair unmolested.

From Saint Bartholomew's we strike away straight for the Temple.

Of the ancient Bernardine house here only the church remains, the remainder of the buildings having been destroyed by

Wat Tyler; whilst the church itself escaped the Great Fire by the merest shave, the flames, it is said, actually licking its east end.

The purely Norman portion of the church consists of the famous round "vestibule," with its beautiful entrance gate, although the nave is of but forty years later date.

But even here we see the struggle between Norman and Pointed or Early English, for, although the triforium arches are Norman, the pillars which support the pointed arches beneath are Early English. Their capitals, however, are Norman. The entrance above alluded to, the only enriched Norman arch in London, dates from the reign of Henry the Second.

As we mount the spiral staircase which leads us to the triforium, we may note the narrow penitential cell contrived in the thickness of the massive walls, wherein—amongst other victims—Walter de Bache-ler, Grand Preceptor of Ireland, died in his fetters. The triforium itself has been consecrated to tablets and memorials of more or less famous Templars.

The recumbent figures under the vestibule originally lined the adjoining nave, and have been most carefully restored and identified. The beautiful Pointed nave has been described as the most exquisite specimen of that style in existence, and is actually, as a monument of old monastic London, of greater interest than the famous circular vestibule, which is so spick and span that a stranger, not knowing its history, might almost be pardoned for doubting its antiquity.

Of the two great Norman houses in Clerkenwell, that of the Hospitallers of Saint John of Jerusalem—which, as we have said, was a rival establishment to that at the Temple—and the Black Benedictine Nunnery, nothing remains above ground.

The crypt, however, of Saint John's Church is one of the finest in London, and is a good specimen of ecclesiastical architecture at that period when the struggle was going on between the Norman and Early English styles. Probably, almost certainly, it was, like the crypt of Bow Church, above ground, and, until thirty years ago, was used as a burial place. This is all that remains of the old priory.

Making our way to the busy Aldgate High Street, it is hard to realise that here, in Norman days, stood what was, perhaps, the most splendid and powerful religious house in London. The priory was founded by

Matilda, the wife of Henry the First, for the Canons Regular—the same fraternity which held Saint Bartholomew's, Smithfield, Saint Mary's Spittle, and Saint Mary's, Southwark. At the end of Cree (Christ's) Church Lane, we believe a relic of the old house was visible before the modern warehouses were erected, and an arch at the back of a shop in Leadenhall Street is said to have belonged to it; but certainly nothing else remains above ground. Of the hardly less famous Black Benedictine Nunnery, a solitary memory is perpetuated in the name of the Three Nuns public-house, near the Aldgate Metropolitan station; but there are many old houses scattered about here which must date from a period long anterior to the Great Fire, and which may have seen the last days of the famous religious establishments close by.

Crossing the river, we enter Southwark—most untempting, but most interesting of London "faubourgs."

Previous to the fire which raged here in 1676, and which completely altered the face of the neighbourhood, some remains were yet extant of the famous Priory of Saint Mary's, the church of which, after the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, was united with that of Saint Mary Overies, under the title of Saint Saviour's. The beautiful lady chapel of the present church is said to have belonged to the old priory; but the only Norman remains in it are the oaken effigy of one of the Norman founders of the priory, and a Norman arch in the wall of the north aisle.

Crossing the road and proceeding down the Bermondsey Street, we arrive at the church of Saint Mary Magdalen, Bermondsey. This church, a sufficiently interesting building, dating some two hundred years back, stands on the site of the chapel of the once-famous Abbey of Bermondsey, which was a Cluniac foundation. Before the graveyard was converted into a recreation ground, the walls on one side of it were those of the original abbey; but those which exist are palpably more modern.

We explore Grange Walk in the hope of lighting upon some remains of the old abbey gateway, which existed there not many years back, but with no result; and similar disappointment awaits us in our peregrination down Long Walk, where, in Bear Yard, we are told another relic exists. Bermondsey Square marks the site of the old abbey

close, and a street name or two suggest monastic derivations; but all else is prosaic nineteenth century squalor, filth, and poverty.

Despairing, therefore, of ferreting out any further relics of the old Norman religious houses of London, we retrace our steps across the river, and commence a search for "sundries."

First and foremost amongst these sundries is the Norman keep of the Tower of London, better known as the White Tower. Built upon the foundations of Caesar's "Arx Palatina," externally it presents to us to-day much the same appearance that it presented to the old Londoners, who saw that the hand of the Norman in the land tarried not in securing conquest, and who marvelled that its architect, Gundulph, who built also on the same plan the still-surviving keep of Rochester, should, beneath the garb of a man of peace, display such ability for matters military.

Here were concentrated chapel, palace, council-chamber, hall, and prison; but all that has come down to us in unadulterated Norman form is the chapel, dedicated to Saint John, and, previous to the recent restorations, used as the Record Office.

The shape of the chapel, with its semi-circular apse, reminds us of Saint Bartholomew's, Smithfield; but the character is far plainer and simpler, and, therefore, more typical of the pure early Norman style.

Groping amongst the prisons in the basement of the Tower, we may note several specimens of that bold Norman vaulted roof which gradually, from one reason or another—perhaps the inability of the native artificers to carry out the designs of their foreign architect-masters—gave way to the flat wooden roofing which is so notable a characteristic of later Norman work in our great cathedrals.

Externally, as we have said, the White Tower retains its Norman character; but the requirements, civil and military, of succeeding ages, have, with the exception of Saint John's Chapel, gradually ousted all Norman work from the interior. The chapel is still used for divine service when the orthodox Tower Church of Saint Peter ad Vincula is not available; but we should mention that it is not included amongst the public sights, and that in order to see it a special order, giving access to the "reserved sights," must be procured.

Hard by is the ancient church of All Hallows, Barking, in which, as the edifice escaped the Great Fire and is of distinctly

Norman foundation, we expect to find some work of that period. All that is visible, however, are four or five Norman pillars supporting pointed arches. The brasses in this church are amongst the finest in London and are carefully preserved; but we learn with regret that the old time-stained oaken pews are shortly to be swept away in favour of the modern third-class railway carriage arrangement.

From here we go to Saint Peter's, Cornhill. Here, again, from the record on a tablet that the present church stands on the site of the first Christian church in Britain, we seemed to have a right to expect Norman work. As there is nothing, however, above ground, we enquire of a very superior lady pew-opener, if there is a crypt. As if resenting an enquiry, the answer of which does not come within the pale of her paid-for duties, she replies that there may be, but that she really doesn't know, and very evidently does not care. However, a humble old pensioner who has come to receive his "dole," rescues us by saying that although there is no basement to the church, he "minds" the time when there was a subterranean passage connecting the church with that of Great Saint Helen's, but that it has been long blocked up.

The ancient Benedictine Nunnery in Great Saint Helen's was founded in 1212—an epoch when the Norman style of building had not entirely given place to the Pointed; but no remains of the conventual buildings exist, the last having been pulled down at the end of the last century, to make way for the present Saint Helen's Place. Part of the old nunnery basement, however, still remains under Leathersellers' Hall, and in the north-east corner of the present most interesting church, the "City Westminster Abbey," as it has been called, against the blank wall are the seats formerly used by the nuns.

At Austin Friars, of which the old Priory Church is still used as a place of worship by the Dutch community of London, we do not expect to come across any relic of the Norman era, as the house was only established in 1253; but a little prying about in the old cellars of the neighbourhood will afford some evidence of the upward growth of the level of London soil. Especially in some cellars in Old Broad Street may be noted a range of arches which once formed part of the Augustinian cloisters, and, when the present Stock Exchange was built, the continuation of them was discovered in Throgmorton

Street. No doubt the "Old Priory" Wine Vaults in Change Alley formed part of the same premises.

The Church of Saint Mary, Woolnoth, at the junction of Lombard and King William Streets, stands upon ground associated with worship for so many centuries—the remains of a Roman Temple to Ceres having been found beneath the foundations—that we enter it on our way westward.

The vergeress—intelligent, be it noted—tells us that there is a crypt, but that it is entirely filled with coffins, and has long been shut up; a fact which reminds us of the outcry raised some years back about the contamination of the waters of the adjoining pump by the accumulation of bodies under the said church—an outcry which was silenced by proof that the contamination arose from quite different causes.

Some framed legal documents on the walls are said to date from the twelfth century, but as they are written in English, we take the liberty of suggesting the fourteenth for the twelfth.

Hence we go to Bow Church, and here we find a double "bonne bouche" in the shape of an intelligent verger, and a splendid Norman "crypt." Crypt it is now, inasmuch as it is fourteen feet beneath the level of Cheapside; but, from the abrupt cutting short of the arches by the ceiling, it is evident that this gloomy region was the actual Norman Church of Saint Mary le Bow. The pillars which remain, each of pure Norman, form a semicircle, so that we may conclude this to have been the apse of the old church. All is perfect darkness here, so that a lantern is necessary for purposes of inspection; and our cicerone tells us that up to so recent a date as 1862, the coffins were so accumulated here, that there was only a narrow tortuous path between them available for visitors.

We may add that when Wren restored the church after the Great Fire, he discovered under this crypt a Roman causeway, which probably came from the quay on Thames side.

Another instance of the upheaval of London soil may be found not far away in Lawrence Pountney Lane off Cannon Street. Here, close to where stood the old Merchant Taylors' School, is to be seen a carpenter's shop, some twelve feet below the level of the lane, of which the roofing is well-preserved Gothic vaulting in stone.

This was a room of the old Palace of the Dukes of Suffolk; and later, of that Duke of Buckingham who is associated with the "Off with his head!" speech of King Richard the Third, although the speech was never made. Of Baynard's Castle, Mount Royal, and Mount Fichet, the other great Norman fortresses of London, no remains are extant, so that we may finally quit the City, and turn our steps towards Westminster.

Westminster Hall is generally cited as a relic of Norman London, and undoubtedly the bare walls are the work of William Rufus; but the complete restoration effected by Richard the Second, so utterly effaced all characteristic Norman work, that this magnificent relic is essentially a fourteenth century structure. The recent demolitions, however, of the Law Courts, upon their transfer to the new building in the Strand, brought to light, to the joy of antiquaries, the splendid Norman buttresses of the first founder.

In the Abbey itself there is nothing Norman; but in the Chapel of the Pyx we have what is even more interesting, a specimen of the so-called Saxon style, which was but a ruder branch of the same stock; and, did we not know that it was built by Edward the Confessor, might pardonably be classed as Norman work.

Half a century back Londoners might have seen a fine specimen of Norman work in Saint Stephen's Chapel, long the meeting-place of the national parliament; but, having been destroyed to make way for the new Houses of Parliament, nothing but the name which it has given to the entire group of buildings now remains.

A few instructive notes may appropriately close a necessarily short sketch of what is left to us of Norman London.

In the first place, it may appear astonishing that, when we know how plentifully the Normans built, so few remains should have come down to us—or rather, that we should see so little of them. There is a twofold answer to this. First, that the ancestor of many a church which traces its origin to the Norman period, was merely a wooden structure. Second, that bearing in mind the general raising of the level of London soil after the Great Fire, a fact alluded to by us in this paper more than once, Norman London remains hidden away in cellars and basements; and no one but an explorer knows the difficulties in the way of visiting London cellars and basements.

In the second place, it should be remembered that, when we ecstatically expatiate upon the grand, solid, characteristic effects of the interiors of fine Norman edifices, we are unconsciously lauding the present at the expense of the past. The Norman congregations and religious fraternities never saw those massive pillars and those bold arches in all the glory of their stone colouring, for Norman architects invariably plastered the whole, and covered the white ground-work with frescoes—typical remnants of which were found in Saint Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, and may yet be seen in many a country church. Hence, the churchwardens, whom we stigmatise as Goths for whitewashing the stonework of an ancient church, are in reality taking a nearer step towards restoring the building to its ancient appearance than are we, who scrape every bit of plaster and wash off in order to display the natural masonry.

In the third place, we cannot, with too much emphasis, warn the explorer, who would learn anything about London churches, against placing confidence in what is told him by those whom he fondly imagines, from their long residence in the neighbourhood, to be best qualified to make his visit instructive and interesting. The average London city-dweller moves much too actively in the world of the present to be able to give time and attention to matters associated with the past, and is far more interested in the last prominent police case than in the features of a remarkable building, situated almost at his very door, and which attracts curious pilgrims from all parts of the globe.

There was not a dweller in Cock Lane who could point out to us the original "Ghost House." There was no one about Smithfield who knew even of the existence of such a church as Saint Bartholomew the Less; we were flatly contradicted when we stated that it did exist, and only discovered it by peeping at hap-hazard through the hospital gates. Vergers and pew-openers are, as a rule, quite as ignorant; it being a strange fact that, the longer their service in the church, the more profound appears to be their ignorance.

Lastly, the difficulty of obtaining access to many of the most interesting London churches, at other hours than those of divine service, is very great. In some instances the vergers live many streets away; in one case, that of the Dutch

church in Austin Friars, the man's address was given, but it was very long before we could discover his home in the attics.

The practice, however, of throwing the City churches open at certain hours every day for service is becoming general, and it is then that the verger must be seized upon and arranged with, for of necessity no inspection of a church can take place during service time. In support of what we complain of, we invite any one to get into Saint Olave's, Hart Street, or All Hallow's, Barking, or Great Saint Helen's, or Bow Church, on the strength of any information he may derive from a perusal of the parochial notice-boards, which apparently serve the purpose of merely making militia, vaccination, and sermon announcements. All unusual requests, of course, such as ascent to a tower or triforium, or descent into a crypt, must be paid for. *Verbum sap.*

THE BOULEVARDE DIPLOMATIQUE.

THE Turkish city, in which I have the honour to be Deputy-Assistant-Vice-Consul-General, is gradually rousing itself up from its afternoon's doze. The trees and wide-eaved houses are beginning to throw long shadows, and in another hour it will be "Aksham." It has been a blazing hot day, and almost unendurable indoors, even with all the blinds drawn down on the sunny side of the house, and with all the windows open; but now the faint rustling of the leaves outside tells us that a little breeze has come to cool us, and that the hour for the evening promenade has arrived.

My chief and I descend into the garden, which now looks sadly sun-baked, and feels like an oven, with every breath of wind shut out by the twelve or fourteen feet of cobble walls by which it is surrounded. In the shade outside the Kavaskhana Simon, the head Kavas, squats on the ground with his eyes half shut, sleepily blowing long streams of blue cigarette-smoke through his hooked nose. He rouses himself sufficiently to half rise to his feet as we come down, but the moment our backs are turned relapses into his former attitude. In strong contrast to him is old Marco, who combines the functions of second Kavas and gardener, and who is now hoeing away at the hard soil with no protec-

tion for his head against the sun but a little white felt skull-cap. Old Marco is a character in his way, and his appearance is peculiar. The only Christians of Scodra who are allowed to wear the "fustanelle," or full white petticoat of the Mohammedan Albanians, are the Kavasses of the Consulates; and Marco, who is himself short, has, probably from motives of economy, furnished himself with one of the very shortest of "fustanelles," so that he looks like an elderly ballet-dancer in the scantiest of skirts. But for him this garment represents all that is gorgeous in the matter of dress; and so, to protect it when he is gardening, or not on duty, he has manufactured out of some old sacks an enormous pair of loose trousers, into which he packs himself and his "fustanelle."

His chief drawback is that he speaks no language but his own, and is very dense in understanding what is meant by signs, so that it is very difficult to communicate with him at all. He is a devout and most superstitious Catholic, and literally starves himself all Lent, eating nothing but a little maize-bread, and drinking nothing but water; but, on the principle of making up for lost time, he gorges himself so piggyishly at the feast which is always given to the servants on Easter Day, that his much abused digestion revolts, and he appears on Monday morning a groaning and miserable object. His first petition then is for "Sale Inglese," or Epsom salts, which are considered a notable remedy by his compatriots; and in the evening he doses himself recklessly, only to reappear next morning as haggard and ghastly as a galvanised mummy. He groans and sighs over his work for a day or two, but such is the wonderful constitution of this leathery old man, that before the week is out he is as hearty and active as ever.

In the garden wall is a postern-gate, and, passing through this, we cross the one-plank bridge that spans the little stream surrounding the house and garden, and enter the public garden. There is always a large colony of ducks feeding by the stream in the late afternoon, and regularly every day our approach sends them quacking and waddling in every direction, giving occasion for some ill-conditioned joker to declare that one can always tell when the English are coming because of the "canards" which precede them. Jokes are rare with us, and the little European colony has subsisted on this one for more than a year.

The public garden is an invention of the Vali Pasha, who turned a waste bit of land, where all the old tin pots and general refuse of the quarter were thrown, into a pleasant garden with plenty of shrubs and flowers in the beds, and a kiosk in the centre.

Beyond the public garden runs a road, up and down which the Consuls and Vice-Consuls, and all the aristocracy of the European colony promenade every day before sunset, and for this reason it is known as the "Boulevarde Diplomatique," or "Village Green"—a witticism which had a great success before the "canard" joke was invented.

The Greek Consul's little house looks out upon this road, and even more than the Athenians of old are the modern Greeks ever on the watch for the chance of seeing or hearing some new thing; so, at whatever hour I go into the public garden, I may be sure of catching a glimpse of my Greek friend, half hidden behind the window curtain, peeping up and down the road to see who is coming or going, and no doubt gathering plenty of material for those voluminous despatches which he writes every week, in spidery Greek characters, and reads over to himself with such evident satisfaction and so many chuckles.

Our appearance on the Boulevard Diplomatique is instantly perceived by him, and he quits his window to join us. He is a tall, thin, sallow-faced man, with the beard and walk of a conceited goat, and is carefully dressed for the afternoon promenade in a long, black frock-coat, tightly buttoned up, and with a pair of kneed trousers falling awkwardly over his broad flat shoes. Round his throat he wears a little black bow, and on his head a billy-cock hat, very high in the crown and narrow in the brim.

He flatters himself that he is a brilliant French scholar; but, as he has never been in Europe, his French savours very much of back numbers of the "Revue des Deux Mondes." From this periodical he has copied a paper full of long-winded phrases, which he always carries about in his pocket to be learned for future use in conversation, when there is no one to talk to, and it is too dark to look out of the window.

His two topics of conversation are himself and "mon pays," and his ignorance on European, and especially on English matters, is of the blandly self-satisfied and

not-to-be-convinced order; but perhaps for this very reason he is a most entertaining companion, and our constant associate in our evening stroll. He is capital fun, for so sublime is his self-consciousness that he always imagines every one to be looking at or talking of him, and gets into agonies if he hears people laugh without knowing what it is they are amused at. Life would be distinctly duller here without him.

In a few minutes we are joined by the French chancellor, with his "képi" on his head, his eternal cigarette in his mouth, and his celebrated dog, Fox, by his side. Last autumn Fox was given up for dead, for a snake bit her on the lip when we were out shooting on the plain. We had some of the natives with us, and, after they had killed the snake, they looked about for a certain plant without success for some time; and, when they did find it, poor Fox was stretched out stiff and lifeless. The Albanians said it was too late; but one of them, as he had found the leaf, thought he might as well use it, so, chewing a little, he placed it on the wound and down Fox's throat. We then placed the poor dog under a hedge and covered her with a branch of the wait-a-bit thorn. That was on November the twentieth; on the twenty-fourth Fox turned up alive, but very weak and thin, at her master's door. Strangely enough, the remedy had not been applied too late, and the dog recovered to become a celebrity.

Her master is a capital fellow, and a sportsman, but rather too careless to be a pleasant companion after the birds. If I go first through a gap he scrambles after me with his gun at full cock, held loosely under his arm; if I make him go first he trails the muzzle of his gun behind him, so that I am constantly in expectation of going home in the game-bag.

We were out after quail one day, and a bird got up just as we were approaching a road along which a peasant was going to the bazaar with his wife riding astride of an old horse. The little Frenchman was too excited to hold his fire, and the report of his gun was followed by a loud yell, and the thud of a heavy body falling to the ground. The peasant pointed his rifle threateningly at us, and we rushed forward full of apprehension, for it is a serious matter to put shot into an Albanian; but happily we soon saw that no harm was done; the old horse, being peppered behind with small shot, had flung up its heels and sent its rider on her back in the mud.

The mountaineer burst into roars of unfeeling laughter at seeing his wife plastered with mud, and she rained down maledictions upon the horse, her husband, and ourselves; but a few piastres soon set everything right, and we continued our sport, thankful that we had not to run for our lives before an infuriated tribe of mountaineers.

Our friend's chief is not to be seen to-day; he retired into private life nearly a week since, on the occasion of his yearly baths. For more than a month there has not been a cloud in the sky, the earth is parched and cracking, and life is only rendered tolerable to an Englishman by the plentiful use of a cold tub; but a Frenchman does not consider that the bath should be entered lightly or without proper precautions. In happier climes, he would, no doubt, make his annual visit to some fashionable sea-side bathing-place, and there disport himself on the beach in a tight and many-hued garment, once a day stalking down a plank-path across the shingle, slowly and with conscious pride, towards the sea, till he was immersed as far above the knee as the authorities would permit, and then he would splash himself discreetly and with caution, or, perhaps, join hands and bob round in a circle with ladies and gentlemen similarly attired; but here there is no "plage," and no "costume de bain," nothing but a tin bath and solitude.

We lose his society for ten days, and he takes six baths. On his retirement from the world he takes medicine, and devotes the first two days to preparing himself for the ceremony. Then for six consecutive days he takes a bath, the water being slightly warmed that he may catch no chill, and then he remains indoors for two more days that his system may have time to recover from the shock before he exposes himself to the chance of catching cold under an August sun. The ten days past, he reappears among us washed and rejuvenated, and so marvellous in his economy, that, on those half-dozen baths, he manages to look perfectly clean all the year round.

Presently we meet the Italian, a lively little man, and then the Austrians and the Russian; but we have only time to exchange greetings with them, for it is getting late, and the Muezzin, mounting the little wooden minaret of the Mosque opposite, proclaims the hour of prayer in a high-pitched nasal voice. It soon gets dark when once the

sun has set, and so with due deliberation, the lamplighter begins to light the petroleum lamps which the Vali Pasha has placed round the public garden and along the street near it.

This functionary is a tall and gaunt old Mussulman, with a fierce moustache, an embroidered scarlet jacket, and a huge "fustanelle." He carries a ladder, a box of lucifer-matches, and a huge green cotton umbrella. He plants his ladder against the wooden post on the top of which a common tin lamp is insecurely fastened, and taking off the glass chimney, opens his umbrella to keep off the wind. The handle of the umbrella is tucked under his arm, and then balancing himself on the rickety ladder, he proceeds to strike a light with his lucifers, carefully protecting the sputtering flame with both his hands.

Naturally this is a slow process, and by the time the dozen lamps are lighted everybody is safe at home, for the citizens do not go out at night, but retire to rest at a very early hour. The appearance of the lamplighter warns us that dinner must be ready, and that the public garden gates will soon be shut; so, wishing our friends "good night," we retire through the little gate in the wall, and mount the stone stairs which lead to the living rooms in the old Albanian house. My own little house is in a street a couple of hundred yards off, so I do not delay long, but set off through the darkening and rapidly-emptying streets to my own home, where the faithful Achmet, and Simon, the cook, are busily preparing the evening meal.

LONDON EXHIBITIONS.

WE must have our exhibitions. London and the great provincial cities are agreed upon that point. And not only those exhibitions of art and industry which are always with us, but also those bright and pleasing general shows which include gay gardens and fountains, music, and myriad of lamps glowing nightly among lawns and groves. We must have, also, an element of serious interest to justify us in taking our pleasure. It is the pursuit of knowledge that brings people from country-houses and parsonages, from villa, farm, and shop, to visit the exhibition of the period. If they are ultimately found whirling down tobogganning slides, or cruising over the undulations of the switchback railway, they may be supposed

to be unbending their minds after exhaustive studies of industrial products or mechanical inventions.

So far, we have had nothing brighter or more pleasant than the Italian Exhibition at West Kensington, with its "chic" and pretty local colouring; and, coming as a surprise, those very charming galleries where one may wander about steeped in impressions of that lovely and famous land. Then we have the Anglo-Danish—more Anglo than Danish, perhaps, but engineered for such an excellent purpose, and withal so pretty in itself. The fairy scene of "The Fisheries," which was never surpassed in the way of glamour and enchantment by the more elaborate electric lighting of the later exhibitions—all this renewed and even improved upon, as far as the garden-fête is concerned. Ireland, too, claims a share of public attention. The fine hall close to Addison Road Station, known as Olympia, will be open all the summer; and, while the interior of the building will be filled with exhibits of Ireland's natural products, of her industries, and of those antiquities in which her soil is so rich, we are to have an Irish Village, a Round Tower, a Blarney Castle, and something like a horse-fair—anyhow, a jumping or steeplechasing exhibition, which will gratify all those sporting tendencies which, latent or evident, form part of nearly everybody's personal baggage.

Now, if we add to these the faithful friends of each succeeding year, such as the Crystal Palace, with its evening fêtes, its fireworks, and illuminations among its charming grounds; our theatres all in full swing; our concert-halls, with their varied feasts of sweet sounds; with these and many other diversions, suited to all the various tastes, London is not likely to lose her prestige, whether in the eyes of country visitors or of her own peculiar children. And something in the air seems to say that the winter of our discontent has at last broken up; that hard times do not mean to come again any more—at all events, not yet awhile; that we may take our favourite diversions without being over-anxious about what the future may bring. In fact, we may respond to our favourite slogan, "Vogue la galère," without much dread of the future question, as to what business we had on board that favourite but somewhat perfidious craft.

And the mention of the galley—that time-honoured and useful friend of the

scribe—brings us at once to the Italian Exhibition. Very opportunely has the Italian Government sent over a number of models of naval architecture, both ancient and modern, and among them some capital models of the galleys of old times, with their fierce crews of slaves and criminals, and their double or four-fold banks of oars, such as Venice sent forth in the pride of her power, when she was Queen not only of the Adriatic, but of the Mediterranean. All these in contrast with the models of the giant ironclads of the period, which now enable united Italy to claim rank as one of the naval powers of the world.

But neither warlike material, nor harsh industrial products, are characteristic of the Italy of our imagination: a picture which the bright scene at West Kensington helps us to realise—a Roman market-place, a ruined street in Pompeii, distant Alpine summits—and all arranged with a taste and dexterity which is truly Italian. There are times when the illusion is tolerably complete, as when night gathers round with cerulean sky and shining stars, and the housetops form a sky-line, like ranges of purple hills against the golden glow; then, with the twang of the mandolin, and the strains of distant music in the air—with all this we may get something of the Italian feeling into our waking dreams.

But, if Italy is not exactly industrial, she is industrious enough in her way; and she has much to show in those mingled products of artistic work and manual dexterity—Roman mosaics, and those of Naples, Florentine jewelry, inlaid cabinets and furniture; revived arts—in the way of faience and of the once-famed Venetian glass—with coral-work, and gems, and cameos, trinkets fine and rare, gold and silver filagree work, ornaments in lava, tortoise-shell, and mother-of-pearl;—all these things are pleasant to view, even if they occasionally excite feelings of cupidity and envy. Then lace holds an important position. The makers of Venice point have never disappeared entirely from the scene, and the art and mastery thereof, now revived and extended, are still of importance in the old city of the lagoons.

After all, as is only fit and right, the great feature of our Italian Exhibition is its Italian art.

With twenty-two rooms devoted to the exhibition of works of art, and more than a thousand pictures hung upon their walls, there is plenty of work cut out for critics and cognoscenti. But for the general

uncritical public also the collection is full of interest.

Italian art—the modern art of Italy—is just now in a very interesting stage. It has shaken itself free from dreary ancestral traditions; it runs, in no wise, on the grand and classic lines of the Old Masters; it has escaped, too, from the gloomy shades of German influence, and now seems to be finding its way to a distinct expression of the national sentiment in art. The school is French, no doubt, but it is French with a difference; and the difference—which is of motive and sentiment rather than of process—is one which time will probably strengthen.

But, apart from its artistic meaning, the Italian collection is of general interest as giving us at one view such a vivid representation of the inner life of a land more talked about than understood; in all its modern aspects, with its setting of glowing skies and deep blue seas, with pathetic sunsets above the ruins of an older world, or sunrises as sad over the modern world of labour and suffering.

Here are peasants at work in the fields, and here again is the life of the city, scenes of the convent, and scenes—unconventional—of the studio, the conscript on the march, the fisherman in his boat; all the scenes, pathetic, trivial, grave or gay, the stimu'ling passion, the corroding care, the trifling pleasures, and sorrows too substantial, which form the business of the passing hour. And thus, in passing through these galleries, with only a hasty glance at the many pictures, we may carry away with us a real, if vague, impression of the land and its people, such as we might fail to attain by more arduous and conscientious studies.

It is not easy to admire the later development of sculpture and the plastic arts, as shown at the Italian Exhibition, where a spirit fantastic and grotesque has replaced the tranquil goddess of other times. But this is not an age in which high art in sculpture has much chance of recognition.

From Italy to Denmark is a far cry geographically, and the genius of the two peoples seems a long way apart. Our early impressions of the Danes—derived from historical text-books now no doubt superseded—were of a decidedly hostile character. Those Danes were always harrying and plundering; and they often got the best of such fights as were going at the period, in a way that injured the

susceptibilities of a sturdy patriot. But of late years we have heard nothing but good of them; and a visit to the Anglo-Danish Exhibition will only confirm this favourable impression. As already noticed, here is the old locale of the Fisheries and the Health Exhibition; and in the new presentation of the old scene, the character of Hamlet is by no means omitted. Indeed, in the pleasant garden fête of to-day, which continues the traditions of Ranelagh and Vauxhall, we are constantly reminded of Hamlet, and of his Danish extraction. Yonder is his tomb; there is the old tower of Kronsberg, where the ghost may have walked, and the players have been duly entertained. There is a Danish village, too, and a windmill; and Danish peasants at their daily employments. Then you have an art gallery adorned with works of the great Thorwaldsen, and hung with pictures by Danish artists; while the inimitable story-books of another great Dane, Hans Christian Andersen, are illustrated by tableaux vivants in their appropriate hall. And it is everybody's bounden duty to go and visit the Anglo-Danes, as it is carried on for the benefit of an excellent charity, the Hospital for Incurables; and, after the first visit, people will often revisit the charming evening fête for the sake of its own attractions.

Ireland comes next on our list, for Erin has fairly launched herself among metropolitan entertainers, and her green banner waves over the halls of Olympia. Now that all the fittings of the hippodrome are removed from that building, we see what a noble area it affords for such an exhibition. Gay with parti-coloured flags is the roof of wondrous span; the floor is covered with avenues of gaily-decorated stalls and stands, and with the swell of a fine organ or the ringing notes of a military band—Irish, of course, also, belonging to the Connaught Rangers, or, perhaps, to the Tipperary Blazers, or some other regiment of decided nationality—Erin may consider her business fairly launched.

And, considering the matter, we shall find how many products Ireland affords which are peculiar to herself, or which she furnishes in the greatest perfection. Dublin stout hardly lends itself to histrionic display; but a great trophy of barrels, loaded on their own special trucks, with their own special engine to draw them, serves as a reminder of what we owe to Ireland in that way. And how charmingly mellow the whisky looks in the innumerable

bottles and glass vessels which exhibit its perfections! Then, where shall we get anything to beat real Irish linen, for all qualities of texture, beauty, and utility? And here we have the looms at work developing those beautiful damasks which are sought by Kings and Queens for table napery, and which are worthy of their high estate; while, for the linen of ordinary wear, here are other less elaborate looms, some of even primitive construction, and, with them, spinning wheels of all kinds which still are sometimes to be found away among the "spinsters and knitters in the sun."

There is the ulster, too, the majestic ulster, for in its real Irish form this is, indeed, a majestic garment; and when you come to Irish frieze, where can you find anything to stand the weather like it, if you yourself have the strength to stand under its massive texture? And bog oak, too—surely you are at home among the bog-oak stalls, and Grafton Street, Dublin, seems not far away. And Irish lace, too, is not easy to beat, nor are those magnificent embroideries contributed by the Irish School of "Art Needlework." The old Irish elk, too, in skeleton form, towers over the scene.

There are bells, too—Irish bells—excellent in form and sonorous in tone, successors of the sacred bells of old, which may be heard even now of still nights from the bottom of loch or river pool; and crosses, too, memorial crosses of the old Irish form in the old Irish granite.

And, if it comes to that, where can you match the Irish horse for his pluck, his mettle, his endurance? For the Irish horse is to be one of the features of the exhibition. Some have arrived, and others are on their way at the present time of writing.

But the cows are here in force—the real Irish cows, with a real Celtic motion about those supple hind legs of theirs. Not merely a sample for tasting, but whole rows of the comely beasts, as if a great dairy business were intended by-and-by.

And then there is to be found a bit of old Ireland in the adjoining ground, which is approached by a tunnel which might be a cave among the rocks of Killarney, with crags and ferns growing out of the crevices, and opening out upon the view a land of marvel and mystery, where a strong feudal castle, battlemented and loopholed, has arisen in a night—a fortnight, anyhow; and where the square tower of Blarney Castle

—the original Blarney stone could not be spared for the occasion—looks down upon a village of Donegal, and what we may imagine to be Punchestown racecourse; anyhow, there is the grand stand rising from its foundations, and a course where there is to be leaping and jumping by real Irish hunters.

Nor will the pig be forgotten; anyhow, there are the styes getting ready for the peasant's friend.

And when the peasants are comfortably settled in their cottages, and the sports are "forward," we may hope for a sight of real Irish brogues dancing a real Irish jig.

RED TOWERS.

By ELEANOR C. PRICE.

Author of "Gerald," "Alexia," etc., etc.

PART II.

CHAPTER IX. OLD FRIENDS.

It was not till Paul Romaine found himself back at Red Towers that things began to take their right proportions in his mind, with the discovery that, after all, there was a good deal worth living for in life still. Sometimes duty, like a passion, pulls a man with strong cords, so that he must follow her; and for the last few months, though Paul was hardly conscious of it, she had been pulling him home to Red Towers.

He was no longer the absent young Squire who, five years ago, had wandered through his woods, lost in dreams of music and poetry, and the first love which had spoilt the best years of his youth for him. Even now he was only twenty-eight; but in mind he was a good deal older; and so Mr. Bailey, the agent, found, when with some little amusement and curiosity he obeyed Paul's summons to go over the estate with him. All sorts of reforms were instantly set on foot; money was spent in all directions, on cottages, farms, land, parish improvements, all with a singular leaning to the interest of the tenants, rather than of the landlord.

Mr. Bailey told every one that Red Towers would be a model estate very soon; he himself especially marvelled at Paul's keen observation, and at all the suggestions that came from him. The neighbours, who were rather more numerous than they used to be, did not even now find Paul very sociable; the Vicar and Dr. Graves seemed to be the only two people of whom he cared to see much, and he was rather tormented by a large artist family which

had taken Canon Percival's house for the summer. There were several girls, who prowled sketching about the woods, and whose art had not been to them much of an education; for they found the tall, dark Squire a most interesting person, and seemed to have a keen instinct for the picturesque places through which his daily walks might lead him.

Paul was too chivalrous not to behave kindly and civilly to his tenants. He fled from these young people, it is true, on every occasion, but he sent their mother great baskets of roses, and he went to see her sometimes when the girls were out. She was a quiet woman with some good sense of her own, dwelling far below the artistic heights of her family.

It was of course practically impossible for Paul to see nothing of people who lived a few hundred yards from his own door; and after one of the girls, who was musical, had discovered his great talent for music, his isolation began to be more impossible still. Dr. Graves and Mr. Bailey agreed that Paul's escape would be a miracle, and all the old servants, Sabin and his wife, Ford, Barty, Mrs. Perks—Barty had now married the housemaid at Red Towers, and lived in Colonel Ward's old cottage to take care of it—grew more angry and anxious every day. To think that the master, who was to have married a beautiful, grand young lady like Miss Darrell, should take up with one of these little painting upstarts! It was felt as a disgrace that such a thing should be even talked of in the village. And, in the meantime, Paul went unconscious on his way. He did not want to hear Miss Sibyl Cox play the organ, and he was rather bored and vexed when Miss Phyllis Cox presented him with a sketch she had made of Red Towers. He stuck it up on the bookcase in the study, however, and spoke sharply to Sabin when it disappeared and was found hidden under a pile of newspapers.

"He wants somebody to look after him, does that young man," remarked Mrs. Sabin, who had been guilty of hiding the sketch. "There ain't even the Colonel now. He's just as simple and innocent as when he was a boy, and he'll fall a prey to some of them designing things, see if he don't."

The Sabins were still more alarmed one day, when Paul came in with Mr. Cox, the father; it was the first time that any of the family had been inside Red Towers. Paul took Mr. Cox all over the house,

through the bare, unfinished rooms; strangely fresh they looked, these rooms unused for nearly five years, the walls dressed in Celia's favourite colours; but Mrs. Sabin had taken good care of them. Mr. Cox had done a good deal in the way of decorating houses; and now it had occurred to Paul that his old house ought not to be left in its present state any longer, and he wanted Mr. Cox's advice as to setting to work upon it. Mr. Cox suggested a few things rather modestly; and then, quite in innocence, for he was an honest little man, devoted to his art, he said that his daughters, Phyllis and Emily, had made a study of the subject, and that a good many houses in London had been decorated after their ideas.

"It is a pleasure to see them among draperies," said Mr. Cox. "Phyllis can hang a curtain in a hundred different ways, I believe; her folds are delicious. Emily's strong point is a corner; she can do anything with a corner. A recess, too; you have so many recesses here. Yes, these old rooms are suggestive to the last degree."

"And the colour, the foundation is all right, is it?" said Paul.

"It is utterly satisfying," Mr. Cox replied.

"Thank you," said Paul.

He said no more; the jargon repelled him now, as it had repelled him before, though from the lips of Celia. But he walked with the artist along the common to his house, in the glowing beauty of the summer evening. Somebody hurried out of the wood, not in time to overtake them; it was Phyllis—she had been sketching in that corner, loved by artists, where Celia had sat and read Vincent Percival's letter, one October day long ago. Phyllis was not pursued into the wood by the Squire: no such luck for her; she saw him leave her father at the gate, and walk on himself down the lane towards the village, where there was no chance of catching him. The next best thing was to hurry home and hear what he and her father had been talking about.

Paul went marching on at a great pace down the sandy lane. It was the middle of August, a beautiful time for this country of his. The heather, in its fullest bloom, lay like a purple carpet on the commons and hills; harvest was going on slowly in the fields among the dark rich woods.

The tenderness and beauty of the evening, the white church spire in the foreground of that view, as Paul walked down

to it, could not fail to have effect on a nature like his.

He was thinking of his old friends; he had been thinking of them all day, with a sort of loneliness, a longing to hear again some voice he used to love, which had, in fact, driven him to that consultation with Mr. Cox.

Paul's practical doings had still their little romantic inspirations, though Mr. Bailey—not, perhaps, Dr. Graves—would have been surprised to hear it. Paul was not thinking of Celia, not consciously at least; that meeting with her husband had removed even any lingering regret; he was beginning to know that he had outlived that passion of his boyish days. But he was feeling utterly friendless. His naturally affectionate nature was starving, in its native air, for some other human being to give it what it missed.

He was thinking of the dear old Colonel, how he and his dogs used to walk about the lanes, how he was in and out of Red Towers at all hours of the day, how he almost looked upon the place as his own. How angry he was when Paul talked of marrying, and then— The latter part of the story was too sad to be thought all over again; but Paul remembered, rather vaguely, that the Colonel had once vexed him by ordering a tree to be cut down. If he were here now—dear old man!—he might cut down every tree in the wood.

Then all these thoughts of Colonel Ward led on to the thought of Mrs. Percival, Colonel Ward's ideal all through his simple, faithful life; her soft brown eyes, her pretty white hands, the sweet smile and manner which attracted so many people.

She had always been very kind to Paul when he was a boy; she had been more like his mother than any one else. He did not quite know, now, what she had done that could not be forgiven; probably Celia had deceived her too.

For some weeks past Paul had been a little self-reproachful as regarded Mrs. Percival. Very soon after he came home, having heard of it by some chance, she had written him one of her pretty notes, asking him to come and see them at Woolborough. Paul, still cased in the cold crust of a hardened traveller, and full of his new resolve to devote himself sternly to his tenants, and to live like a hermit in England, with occasional visits to the East, had sent a short and snubbing answer to this invitation:

He had told himself clearly that he had better have nothing more to do with that family, and he meant to carry out this intention. But, somehow, several times, things at Holm which reminded him of Colonel Ward reminded him of Mrs. Percival too. He was never able to help thinking of her, for instance, when he stood by the Colonel's grave in the little, still churchyard, with its old yew-trees, one of which, about sunset, threw a shadow on the grave.

The Colonel himself had always been faithful to his old loves and friendships. How would it have been, Paul sometimes wondered, if he had lived a few weeks longer—lived to know of Celia's falseness? He used to say that he never changed his mind about anybody. Well, even in that case, he would not have changed his mind about Mrs. Percival, and why should he?

Paul paid a shorter visit than usual that evening to his old friend's grave, and he did not go on into the church, as he had done two or three times lately, to bring back old memories in solemn music—music which had once brought Miss Sibyl Cox peeping in at the church door—but he turned off, and walked back at a great pace to Red Towers to catch the post, by which he sent a few lines to Mrs. Percival:

"If you and Canon Percival would not dislike it, and are quite alone, I should be glad to spend a couple of days with you."

In answer to this, Mrs. Percival sent him a more affectionate welcome than he felt he deserved. Heat once decided to go to Woolsborough the next day, taking with him a large box of curiosities which he had brought from the East, and had never cared to unpack. It had seemed dull work, bringing all these pretty things home to an empty house, for no one but himself. Mrs. Percival would like them, he thought, and they would make a little amends for his ungraciousness.

He started off to Woolsborough, without a word of coming back in two days. Something told him that he would not do that; a strange, young feeling had come over him with Mrs. Percival's letter; in going to Woolsborough, he was once more a schoolboy going home.

Mrs. Percival received him more than kindly—tenderly. A slight nervousness, perhaps, made her more demonstrative than usual; but Paul found no fault with the affection she showed him. The Canon, too, looking graver and older, said heartily how glad he was to see him again. And

the strangest thing was, that the old, original, homely feeling of the house had come back to it; the peace and freedom which used to be there before Celia came, when Paul was a schoolboy. He had half feared to find the place haunted by Celia; but, perhaps, it is only real people with real feelings, not counterfeits, who have the power of leaving a strong impression of themselves behind. Paul found that he could live in the rooms at River Gate, could walk about the garden, row on the river, wander in and out of the Cathedral, linger among the quaint old shops in the streets of the city, without meeting Celia's ghost everywhere, unless he chose to call it up for himself.

At first Mrs. Percival did not mention her name, or go back to the past at all; and it was silently that Paul, looking about him in the drawing-room, saw Colonel Ward's beautiful old china and enamels arranged here and there. The room was so full of pretty things, that Paul's box from the East seemed hardly to be wanted; but when he unpacked it and carried the things in, china, pottery, brass and silver work, Turkish embroidery, and so on, Mrs. Percival's rather worn face reddened and lighted up with pleasure.

"You delightful boy!" she cried, coming into the midst of the Oriental confusion that Paul was spreading about the room. "Vincent did not bring me anything like this from India."

"By-the-bye," said Paul, looking up into her face as he laid a beautiful rug at her feet, "where is Vincent?"

"In France, with the Montmirails," said Mrs. Percival, her happy smile fading.

"Still!" said Paul.

"What do you mean, my dear?"

Paul straightened himself and answered:

"Nothing; only I heard of his being there in May. I was at Tours, passing through, and met Monsieur de Montmirail."

"Did you really? How curious!"

"He told me Vincent was there then. He suggested my going down, too; but I did not quite see it. Vincent has been there all the summer, then."

"No; he was at home for about a month. Then Celia wrote to him from Trouville; they were there. I don't think she asked him to go exactly; but, anyhow, he went. And now I believe he has gone back with them into the country; but Vincent does not write often. I know he likes it very much. He enjoys the life; it amuses him, and he never did care for Woolsborough."

Paul said nothing.

"I think Achille de Montmirail is a good sort of man," Mrs. Percival went on after a moment.

"I always liked him," Paul said. "And he is not a bit changed. We knew each other at once, the other day, and he was very friendly."

"Rather stupidly so," Mrs. Percival thought, "if he asked you to go there. The friendliness is more to your credit than his, my dear Paul. Now, how I should like to know the true history of your and Celia's engagement!"

But this was a question she could not ask, and she took refuge in exclamations of delight over the Eastern treasures, thinking all the time what a goose Celia had been, what a handsome, manly, simple, generous fellow Paul was, and how happy any girl might have been with him. It was better for Paul, though; she confessed that to herself. Celia's character could never have been a good match for his, and her aunt suspected that it was not improving with years. Presently, in the midst of her admiration of Paul's spoils, she said:

"My dear boy, I can't let you waste all these lovely things on me. They must be for your house, for your wife. No; I really won't have them; they shall be packed up again. Just one or two of those brass things, if you like; their shapes are too distracting. It is most nice of you to have brought them all to me; but I can't be so selfish, Paul, really."

"I shall never marry," said Paul; "and they will be much better here than at Red Towers. I shall often see them here, if you will let me come."

"Never marry! Nonsense! Why not?" said Mrs. Percival.

"Because I have lost my faith in women—with a few exceptions," he said, smiling.

"You will find it again."

Paul shook his head. In the days that followed, while he went in and out, enjoying himself in much the same fashion as when he was a boy, renewing his old friendship with Dr. Chanter, with the enthusiasm for music which had long been laid aside, and in the high air of the Cathedral regaining some of the old happy trustfulness which used to be his special charm in his young days; through this time Mrs. Percival, watching him closely and wondering at him not a little, found it almost impossible to allude to the painful histories of the past. She was sorry enough

now for any share which she had had in them, for any scheming into which she might have entered for Celia's sake. She might have been called a worldly woman; but she had a heart, and she meant to be true to her friends. Celia, she felt quite sure now, was both heartless and false; and that Vincent should be so strongly attracted by her now, that he should spend his whole time in attendance on the Marquise, whose "ménage" he had been so curious to see, filled his mother's mind with an anxiety she could not put into words, even to her husband. She knew Vincent's nature very well, and she felt, perhaps now doing a little injustice, that Celia was capable of anything.

One day, when Paul was sitting with her on the terrace after luncheon, and they had been talking of Colonel Ward, she said:

"It was a very great shame that he left Celia all that money. He told me he meant to do it, poor dear, before we left England that autumn; but I thought, and so did he, of course, that it was the same thing as leaving it to you."

Paul was silent for a few minutes, leaning back, staring away at the river and the distant hills.

"There are few things that I am more thankful for," he said.

"Paul," said Mrs. Percival, "you are sometimes beyond my understanding."

Paul turned and looked at her, with a little hardness in his smile.

"Don't pretend to think that I am speaking unselfishly," he said. "If that money had not been left to Celia, she would never— Now I am a brute," he said, colouring; "but I mean this, you know: that the whole arrangement was perfectly satisfactory to me."

"I never could make out—" murmured Mrs. Percival.

"Don't trouble yourself about it," said Paul. "I couldn't explain, so let us drop the subject, please."

Yes, Mrs. Percival felt that it must be dropped now and for ever; the secret of that misunderstanding between Paul and Celia must always be a secret to her. She felt a little awkward, and was glad that the footman came out at that moment with some letters. While Paul was gravely studying an eloquent one from Mr. Cox, she had opened the most interesting of her own, a foreign one, and was reading it with a frown of painful interest.

"Where is the Canon?" she exclaimed, starting up; and then she remembered that

he was gone out for the day. "Dear me! how am I to answer this?" she said. "What a strange thing! Shall I have to go?"

"Can I be of any use? Where are you going?" said Paul, standing up, and putting his own letter into his pocket.

"To bring the girl back! But what am I to do with the girl? Hasn't he relations of his own?" cried Mrs. Percival; and then she sat down again, and held the letter out to Paul. "I can't start off," she said. "I don't want to go there, and the Canon won't go, and I hate those long cross-country journeys alone. Besides—Tell me, Paul, what had I better do?"

"Am I to read this?" said Paul.

"Please; I want your advice," she said.

So Paul read the letter. It was from the Marquis de Montmirail, written in rather involved English; he was very fond both of talking and writing English. It was a pressing invitation to Canon and Mrs. Percival to go at once on a visit to La Tour Blanche. They knew it would be a still greater pleasure to Celia, if possible, than to him. If the Canon found himself too much engaged, would Mrs. Percival come alone? He went on to say that there was some question of a marriage for his daughter Antoinette. Nothing was finally settled yet, and he wished her first to pay a visit to his relations and friends in England. Would Mrs. Percival have the kindness to take charge of her on the journey? "Do not refuse me the favour of this visit, dear madame. Since I have lost my mother-in-law, the Vicomtesse de Ferrand, the charming lady you remember, I have not had any old friend to whom I could address myself as now to you. Pray return me a good answer to this request, which I should only make to a person in whom I had great confidence."

"He wants a safe escort for his daughter, and he wants to send her away to England; and his wife does not concern herself much in the matter. That is how I read his letter, poor thing," said Mrs. Percival.

"It does look rather like that," said Paul. "Wouldn't it be a good thing if you could go?"

"But the Canon won't—and really I'm afraid—and without a line from Celia—not even a message!"

"You need not be afraid," said Paul. "I could go with you—as far as Tours. I could see you off from Tours. Vincent is

there, and there cannot be much doubt that Celia will be glad to see you."

"Thank you, dear," said Mrs. Percival, gazing at him, and speaking rather absently. "As to being afraid, I did not quite mean the journey, perhaps—Timms and I are old travellers enough for that. But of course it will make all the difference if you will go with me—to Tours, I mean. But I must talk to the Canon. When can we start? Dear me, I must write some notes. You won't mind my going in, Paul; this is really rather overwhelming."

She went in at the window, smiling sweetly at the young man as she left him on the terrace, from which he soon disappeared, going down to the ferry and crossing the river for a walk in the fields beyond.

Mrs. Percival did not write notes, but sat down with Achilles's letter, and studied it till her head ached and her bright eyes were clouded: she felt sure that there was something wrong. He wanted to send his young daughter to England, out of the way of something. He wanted Celia's relations to see for themselves, perhaps—and yet Mrs. Percival felt that all this had sprung out of her own imagination. If there was anything odd in Achilles's writing himself, it could be easily explained. Celia was busy, or lazy, or amused; and he was a fidgety, anxious father; perhaps poor Antoinette was rebellious, and did not like the marriage suggested for her. After all, that was very likely. Achilles would be terribly puzzled what to do with an obstinate girl, whose stepmother probably wanted her married as soon as possible. Poor little Antoinette! No doubt she was at the bottom of it all.

Yet beyond this there was a fear, a shadow, which weighed Mrs. Percival's spirits down. There were two people, nearest to her in blood, in whom she felt she could trust nothing but their selfishness. And a mother can love her son in spite of this; but an aunt, to her niece, is not quite so indulgent.

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"Please; I want your advice," she said.

So Paul read the letter. It was from the Marquis de Montmirail, written in rather involved English; he was very fond both of talking and writing English. It was a pressing invitation to Canon and Mrs. Percival to go at once on a visit to La Tour Blanche. They knew it would be a still greater pleasure to Celia, if possible, than to him. If the Canon found himself too much engaged, would Mrs. Percival come alone? He went on to say that there was some question of a marriage for his daughter Antoinette. Nothing was finally settled yet, and he wished her first to pay a visit to his relations and friends in England. Would Mrs. Percival have the kindness to take charge of her on the journey? "Do not refuse me the favour of this visit, dear madame. Since I have lost my mother-in-law, the Vicomtesse de Ferrand, the charming lady you remember, I have not had any old friend to whom I could address myself as now to you. Pray return me a good answer to this request, which I should only make to a person in whom I had great confidence."

"He wants a safe escort for his daughter, and he wants to send her away to England; and his wife does not concern herself much in the matter. That is how I read his letter, poor thing," said Mrs. Percival.

"It does look rather like that," said Paul. "Wouldn't it be a good thing if you could go?"

"But the Canon won't—and really I'm afraid—and without a line from Celia—not even a message!"

"You need not be afraid," said Paul. "I could go with you—as far as Tours. I could see you off from Tours. Vincent is

there, and there cannot be much doubt that Celia will be glad to see you."

"Thank you, dear," said Mrs. Percival, gazing at him, and speaking rather absently. "As to being afraid, I did not quite mean the journey, perhaps—Timms and I are old travellers enough for that. But of course it will make all the difference if you will go with me—to Tours, I mean. But I must talk to the Canon. When can we start? Dear me, I must write some notes. You won't mind my going in, Paul; this is really rather overwhelming."

She went in at the window, smiling sweetly at the young man as she left him on the terrace, from which he soon disappeared, going down to the ferry and crossing the river for a walk in the fields beyond.

Mrs. Percival did not write notes, but sat down with Achille's letter, and studied it till her head ached and her bright eyes were clouded: she felt sure that there was something wrong. He wanted to send his young daughter to England, out of the way of something. He wanted Celia's relations to see for themselves, perhaps—and yet Mrs. Percival felt that all this had sprung out of her own imagination. If there was anything odd in Achille's writing himself, it could be easily explained. Celia was busy, or lazy, or amused; and he was a fidgety, anxious father; perhaps poor Antoinette was rebellious, and did not like the marriage suggested for her. After all, that was very likely. Achille would be terribly puzzled what to do with an obstinate girl, whose stepmother probably wanted her married as soon as possible. Poor little Antoinette! No doubt she was at the bottom of it all.

Yet beyond this there was a fear, a shadow, which weighed Mrs. Percival's spirits down. There were two people, nearest to her in blood, in whom she felt she could trust nothing but their selfishness. And a mother can love her son in spite of this; but an aunt, to her niece, is not quite so indulgent.

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"I'LL TELL THEE, DICK, WHERE I HAVE BEEN."

WRITTEN BY ARTHUR PATERSON.

EDITED BY WALTER BESANT,

AUTHOR OF "ALL SORTS AND CONDITIONS OF MEN," "THE REVOLT OF MAN," "CHILDREN OF GIBION,"
"THE HOLY ROSE," ETC. ETC.

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"I'LL TELL THEE, DICK, WHERE I HAVE BEEN."

CHAPTER I.

HOW FIRST I MET MIKE ALISON.

THE coffee was boiling, the beans were ready, and the bacon was fried to a turn: supper was ready.

It was fifteen minutes since I had trudged wearily home to an empty shanty, desperately hungry and miserably tired. Before I could either rest or eat, a fire had to be kindled on a flat hearth, the wind blowing in the wrong direction; green coffee-berries had to be roasted and ground; and dried bacon and black Mexican beans had to be converted into an eatable condition with the assistance of the frying-pan.

Now this was done. The smoke from the drift-wood fire, which set me coughing for five minutes without intermission, at last found its way out by the door, and the bacon and beans frizzled and cracked as pleasantly as black beans and dried bacon can, on the glowing embers that were left behind.

I smiled with the satisfaction that comes of successful effort. After all, life in sheep-camp had its pleasant side.

Sunset, at the latter end of August, in New Mexico, is the most peaceful time of the day in the finest month of the year. There is no rain in August among the foot-

hills of the Rocky Mountains. The terrific hail and thunder-storms of July, with great murderous hailstones weighing an ounce and more, alternating with fierce, sultry heat, are over. The August sun has still great power, but only for a few hours in the day, and the nights are refreshingly cold; insomuch that the herder, when he goes to bed, presently drops into the soundest and sweetest slumber, beginning from the moment when his head touches the pillow, and forgets to wake at midnight, to see that his charge have not left the bedding-place for a nocturnal ramble.

However, there was one more duty to perform before I could enjoy my supper in peace: this was to ascertain that my sheep, which I had left a mile to the westward half-an-hour ago, were duly wending their way homewards. With the hasty stride of a hungry man I climbed to the top of the "Round Mound," a hillock of about a hundred feet in height, standing alone in the middle of the prairie, at the foot of which my camp-house was built. The origin of the Round Mound is uncertain. It was supposed by some to have been erected by Indians, in order to mark the presence of water; by others to be the mausoleum of an extinct native tribe. Be this as it may, the little hill was a most convenient camping place, for, at its base, were two pools of water that never dried up, and on its sides the sheep bedded most contentedly; while for miles

around capital pasture of all kinds could be obtained without trouble.

I was glad to see, as I reached the crest of the hill, that my sheep were little more than half-a-mile away, edging steadily towards me with low, mumbling baas. There were two thousand—half the "bunch" owned by myself and my partner—a like number being camped ten miles to the east, in charge of Mexican herders; the whole forming a comfortable little property of four thousand head.

I paused a moment before descending to supper, to take a bird's-eye view of the prospect. I am not, as a general rule, much affected by scenery; but I do not think I have ever stood on the Round Mound, no matter how urgent the business which I had before me might be, without lingering a few moments.

From this place I could see nearly every phase of scenery characteristic of the plains. To the north and east lay prairie, endless prairie, in long "rolls," or undulations, brown in colour, with only a tinge of green here and there, where the summer rains had produced more lasting effect than usual. The grass upon it was short and curly, crisp as the hair of a negro, making the most nourishing pasture in the world, for it cures on the ground, and all through the winter remains as sweet as well-matured hay.

Southward for a mile stretched similar rolling prairie-land, brought suddenly to an end by Eagle Tail Mountain, one of the foot-hills, a great table-land or mesa, with dark, rugged sides, some three hundred feet in height, covered with great square boulders of malpice rock, and forests of cedar trees and oak-scrub. There were cañons here, deep and dark, where you might sometimes find a running stream and tall pines shooting up a hundred feet. Then above cañons and forests, lo! there was another prairie, exactly similar to the one below: a prairie miles in length, which rose gradually until it broke off to give way to a great cone of rock, bare and desolate, the crater of an extinct volcano, which formed the head and centre of Eagle Tail Mountain.

So, slowly turning my head from north to east, and east to south, I reached the west, where lay the finest view of all. From north and east the darkness was hurrying up, for there is no twilight on the prairies; but the west still glowed with lurid reminiscences of the sun, and below, pure and white as an angel's wing, shone

the peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Beneath range after range, stood the foot-hills, falling into deep blue shadow, grand and wild, and of no mean height, but dwindling into utter insignificance before the sharp white ridge which towered behind, grand and unapproachable.

As I looked upon this view, vague thoughts and fancies filled my mind which I might have expressed aloud in a beautiful rhapsody had I been less hungry. I remembered in time, however, that my supper was getting cold, and refrained. But, at this moment, I saw something which made me whistle and exclaim softly to myself. Half-a-mile or so to the west were three horsemen approaching in the direction of the Round Mound at a steady gallop.

Anyone who has ever lived in sheep-camp will understand my excitement at the prospect of visitors. I had been "batching" alone for two months; during this time my partner visited me, for five minutes each time, on six separate occasions, and he was the only living soul I had seen since I left the home-ranch in June. Some men have better luck; but I was on the outskirts of the settlement, with no road or track nearer than two miles, and living in a little "dug-out," scooped from the Round Mound, the whereabouts of which it was difficult to discover, except when the sheep were singing their evening hymn.

Taking all this into consideration, together with the fact that this was my first experience of camp-life, the most unsympathetic reader will understand the delight with which I anticipated the arrival of these strangers.

I went down the hill at a run, narrowly escaping a broken neck among the loose stones; dived into the hut for my revolver—for Western etiquette must be observed—and then walked toward the approaching horsemen, feeling inclined to welcome them with a hearty cheer. Happily, I remembered in time, though I was still young to Western manners, that their reply to such a greeting might probably be a rifle bullet, as the only explanation of conduct which, to their minds, would seem dangerous insanity.

As my visitors came clearly into view, my joyous expectations began to change to extreme curiosity. They wore no hats, and no boots; their ponies had no saddles, and their only reins were rough halters of rope. Before they reached me they slackened speed, and dropped into single file. I noticed, now, that their

heads were bent wearily forward, and that there were streaks of blood on the bare feet of the foremost. Before I could see more he briefly accosted me.

"How far d'you reckon we are from Stockton?"

"Ten miles."

He gave a suppressed sigh, and turned to his companions.

"I guessed it was about that, boys. Considerable pull, you see, yet—worse luck!"

They nodded in silent assent, and looked earnestly behind them. The one who had spoken, however, had his eyes fixed with some intentness upon me, and I expected him to ask for supper, and a night's lodging. To my surprise he turned away, with a curt: "We must keep moving, boys. Bueno noche, stranger!"

A cold wave of disappointment passed over my soul.

"But won't you camp with me to-night?"

The man had turned his horse's head, and was about to urge him forward. He paused at my words, and stared at me harder than before, his companions now following his example. Was there anything wonderful in my simple offer of hospitality?

"I've not much to offer you," I went on hastily. "Nothing but bacon and beans to eat, and a blanket apiece to lie on. But you're heartily welcome to it, and perhaps even rough fare is better than ten miles on bare-back ponies. What do you say?"

There was no reply at first. The men looking at me with what I felt was unmitigated astonishment, though it was hard to account for, as all Western men are hospitable in camp. At last the man who had spoken first said slowly to the others:

"Seems to me, boys, that this offer is meant to be straight and square, and as things will be healthy for two hours at least, I shall get down, and risk it."

And get down he did, without a word to me, his friends following his example. The action was satisfactory; but I was a trifle disappointed, for, though I had not offered my hospitality with the object of being thanked, and the men appeared to belong to a low type of cowboy, of whom much in the way of politeness is not to be expected, still a word of acknowledgement would have done no harm. My thoughts travelled in this direction a very little way, however, for I had not gone more than a dozen steps towards my cabin, whither I

proceeded to lead my visitors, before a voice at my elbow said quietly:

"Some years ago, I read a story about a cuss called the Good Samaritan, which pleased me very much. I didn't know that there were any living now. I guess I was wrong."

I laughed, and looked up.

"Thanks; have you fallen among thieves, then?"

"Yes—or Indians, rather—a derved sight worse."

This was interesting, but somewhat incredible.

"I thought Indians were peaceable folk enough now."

"Then you've not left the Old Country long, I presume."

There was a twinkling in his eyes as he spoke, though every step cost his bleeding feet a painful effort.

"I don't go by my own experience," I replied shortly, "though I've been out nine months. This was what my partner, who has been here some years, told me."

"I see. Ay, ranche-folk do take that line, sometimes. We—el, sir, I guess you'll be able to open his eyes, before to-morrow morning."

We had now reached camp. I entered first, and unrolled my blankets.

"Sit down, gentlemen, I'll picket your ponies out. Here's a panful of bacon, and some coffee, which you can have for a start; when I come back I'll cook some more."

My visitors nodded in reply, and promptly threw themselves upon my bed. When I returned, however, I found all three busy cooking, under the direction of the one who had constituted himself spokesman, and who, as he was invariably addressed by the others as boss, was evidently a person of some authority.

As I came in, he pointed to my pan, which was untouched.

"We're waiting for you to clean that out, Colonel. We didn't reckon to eat your supper, as well as run through your camp. Come, set to, and then we'll make a start."

I was touched at this; a consideration rarely seen in a hungry traveller with as rough an aspect as my friend; though I refused, of course, to take advantage of it. A little later, when we were all sitting round a smoking pile of crisp, sweet beans, and making play with knife and spoon, as only hungry stockmen can, I looked at this fellow carefully, feeling the more

freedom to do so, as he rarely raised his eyes above his plate, and seemed entirely engrossed with satisfying the cravings of nature.

He was a man of about thirty-six years of age, five feet ten inches in height, though looking taller by reason of an erect carriage, and a very well-proportioned figure. His clothes, now torn and discoloured, appeared to have been of good stuff originally: a blue flannel shirt, ornamented with beads, delicately worked into the stuff, and well-fitting trousers of the best buckskin.

He had a large head, and a square, strong face, half covered by a black beard and heavy moustache. The chin, so far as one could judge from the beard which concealed it, seemed very massive; the mouth somewhat wide, containing rows of white teeth. Later on, when I knew my man better, I found that in times of excitement, these white teeth gleamed fiercely through the mass of hair, though, as a rule, his lips were tightly compressed.

It was a terrible mouth and jaw, and the hollow cheeks above—for the face was very thin—heightened the effect. It was the mouth of one, whose first instinct from infancy must have been combativeness, which had received encouragement and stimulus—I write from after knowledge—as he journeyed through life, until it had become a second nature.

Yet, when I glanced at his eyes and forehead, I forgot, for a moment, the impression which the lower part of the face had given me. The forehead was broad and square, though the black hair above grew low; and the eyes, set somewhat far apart, and deeply in their sockets, were of a peculiar grey colour—large, clear, and keen. The brows were black, and when the teeth below shone white—I am still writing from after knowledge—became a straight even line above the nose, and, at such times, the eyes glowed like lights burning in some dark cavern. A strange face, full of queer contrasts. A face most men would fear and distrust; for the grey eyes, never at rest, wore a watchful expression such as one sees in a beast of prey. Yet, it must have been exceedingly handsome, before it became so hard, for the features were regular, and the complexion a clear healthy brown.

We finished our suppers, and I retired to the spring to wash the things; the men came also and bathed their feet. Not a word had been spoken yet by my visitors

as to the cause of their miserable condition, except the allusion of the black-haired man to Indians; but Western manners strictly forbade inquiry on my part, and hunger and weariness prevented communicativeness on theirs. I knew, however, that after supper I should hear what had befallen them; and, sure enough, when we had concluded our business at the water, and I had provided pipes and tobacco all round, my curiosity was quickly satisfied.

"I suppose our present fix gave you an idea that we'd been deserting from the nearest fort?" began the black-haired man abruptly, as he balanced himself on my three-legged stool—the only piece of furniture in the place.

"I shouldn't have blamed you," he went on without waiting for a reply; "we looked mean enough. However, it's not so. We've been corralled by Apaches; and only by rare luck we three parted company without losing our scalps. There was another man; but he—he was unlucky."

He paused here for a moment to re-light his pipe, which refused to draw, and had to be laid aside until he had finished his narrative.

"It's not often that Indians get hold of white men in broad daylight; but we'd been on the lope for ten hours before we struck the ford at Grant's old place, ten miles down the Chicareeka River, and, though it was only noon, we felt just about dead beat; so, instead of snoozing gently, when the horses were watered, we slept like so many calves. When we awoke we found ourselves corralled. Fifty red devils in war-paint were smiling at us, and half-a-dozen were busy with a nice, warm fire."

The speaker's eyes dilated, and he bent forward to lay a hand upon my knee.

"Young man, you are fresh from the East, and I dessey you have often heard talk by the mile about the 'poor Indians.' When you go back again, just get into the pulpit somewhere and tell those pitiful folk what Indians in this country do. Here were we—four of us—not one of us so much as shot an Indian in our lives, except in fair fight—stripped as you see, tied up with raw hide (look at my feet) and after waiting a few minutes while the fire burnt up, compelled to sit by and watch another man hung by the arms to a bough of a tree over a slow fire of red-hot cinders. Then—yes, then—the fun began. Good

Heaven, the devilment there is in the red man!"

The narrator paused to pass his hand across his eyes, and I heard him murmur softly to himself, "Poor Tom!" He then continued in the curt tone in which he began.

"Yes; I've fought the Comanche down South, and rubbed against Sioux and Cheyenne in the North, but this is the first time I've seen the Apache. I believe he's the worst of the crowd, though it's hard to tell. I guess these cusses, however, hadn't been on the war-path long, and lost their heads a bit; anyhow, they got so excited with Tom—the man over the fire—that we were forgotten, and when I managed to slip a hand loose and cut the raw hide with a knife I had in a back pocket, we crept to our horses unnoticed, and they did not smell us out until we were well on the track. That's our day's work."

The man stopped speaking with a cough that showed his story was told, and again bent over the fire to manipulate the refractory pipe.

I was now feeling exceedingly uncomfortable. The adventure had been described very simply, yet in a forcible way that made it seem very vivid and real. After a minute's thought, while the other two visitors puffed in silence, calm and stolid, and the one who had spoken devoted his attention energetically to my corn-cob pipe, I began to ask questions:

"And this occurred only ten miles off?"

"Yes."

"Then, perhaps I may expect a visit from these gentry myself?"

"It is very possible."

I whistled.

"Will they follow you?"

"They may."

"And if they strike my camp, must I expect the same treatment as your friend?"

"Perhaps; but it's uncertain. You're a sheepman. Tom was a cowboy. Indians hate cowboys. If they come upon you at all, it will be in a night raid, probably; but there's nothing sure. They may be thirty miles away now. They may be following here. This is a well-guarded settlement, and as soon as we get to town the red devils will have to skip about more'n enough; and so they may keep quiet, except where a horse can be stolen without much trouble."

By this time the pipe was cleaned

and in full blast, and the smoker subsided into a placid silence. I was left to my own thoughts, which were not of the most cheerful nature. Presently the other men gaped and stretched themselves.

"Boys, you'd better nap it for a couple of hours," said the one with the corn-cob pipe. "The moon won't rise before midnight."

"A pious idea, boss. But who'll keep watch? We don't want to be lit on again."

"I have my pipe to finish, and will manage it with this man. You turn in."

They did so, promptly. I watched them curiously, as each rolled himself in a blanket; and then I glanced at my friend by the fire. There was a vast difference between his bearing and theirs, though neither of the others were ordinary-looking men. One was a big fellow, with red hair and a large nose, that had been broken at some time or other, and still had a ghastly white scar across the bridge. His complexion was of the ruddiest, his lips full, and his eyes small and set close together; he was, therefore, not pleasant to look at. But there was a rude strength about his big, bullet head and broad shoulders. He would be an unpleasant enemy. The third man was much younger than his companions. He was very good-looking; with light brown hair, which he wore long, and a curling, silky moustache. Yet there was a sinister look in his handsome blue eyes, a set and twist of the lips, as he sat silently by and helped himself to what he required, that sadly spoilt his beauty. I had not the remotest notion of what he was at that time, but I found his face haunting me, and at this present moment, eight years afterwards, it does so still. I have never seen another like it; I hope I never may.

That evening, however, I thought little about the matter, for the man on the three-legged stool was looking at me with a quiet, contemplative gaze, which seemed to go directly down to the very centre of my being, and come out finally somewhere about the small of my back. Yet I liked it. It neither frightened me, nor made me distrustful. I was altogether predisposed in favour of this man.

First, you see, I appreciated immensely his way of acknowledging the small hospitality I had shown him. Next, I was much impressed by his courtesy in insisting that I should reserve my supper for my own consumption, for it was easy to see that this action on his part was not approved of

by his companions. Moreover, I had enjoyed a good supper myself, and had heard just enough about the danger of an Indian attack, to make me feel sociably inclined toward anyone.

It was not long, therefore, before we were talking freely together. We drew nearer to the fire and heaped on wood; filled and emptied our pipes several times, and talked on and on, neither becoming drowsy, nor anxious for repose.

I have given, as clearly and explicitly as I can, my reasons for liking this grim stranger with the restless, watchful eyes. But there are always things which a man does that he cannot explain, and what followed after we drew close together in those two hours before midnight I can give no satisfactory reason for. I can only state the bare fact, that while the other men slept, I sat before the red embers of my camp-fire, and gave my companion pretty well all the particulars of my past life, including some which few of my most intimate friends in England were aware of, not forgetting hopes and plans for the future. And he listened intently, only putting in a curt remark at intervals, generally in the form of a question, yet with every word showing a quiet, direct interest in the subject that drew me on, almost in spite of myself.

Just before midnight, a curious thing happened. I had paused in the full flood of my narrative to scrape the fire together, and my companion was slowly filling his pipe.

"So your partner is an Englishman?" he said. "Which part of the Old Country does he come from?"

"London; his sisters live there now."

"And how many has he?"

"Two."

"Of whom this young lady, who is coming out to you, is one, I presume?"

"Yes."

"I see." He was now hunting for a suitable cinder wherewith to rekindle his pipe. He found one, raised his head, and between the puffs said slowly:

"You have not told me her name yet. Do you mind doing so?"

I smiled. We had been engaged two years, and were to be married in three months. Yes, I would tell him her name.

"Laura Temple."

He started; the burning wood dropped from his hand, and fell upon his knee; then he sat perfectly still, looking at me with rigid jaws and wide-open eyes. My astonishment may be conceived.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed, "do you know her?"

He took his pipe out of his mouth before answering, and I saw that he had nearly bitten the cane through. A colder voice, however, was never heard, as he replied:

"I know London well. I am an Englishman myself, by birth. Some years ago I came across a family of that name. It is not uncommon. Is this Jack Temple, of Eagle Tail Rancho, your partner?"

"Certainly. You are acquainted with him?"

"By name. Where are you going to locate?"

"Near Smythe's old place on the El Gato Creek. The house is more than half built already; I have six Mexicans at work upon it now."

"It is to be of adobe, then. Nothing better in this country, though expensive to begin with."

Before I could reply, he bent over the nearest sleeper and touched his arm. The man sat up at once.

"Time to move, Pete. The moon's rising. Wake Kit."

A light tap on the shoulder did this, and my visitors prepared to depart. Those who had been sleeping stretched themselves, yawned, and made their way to the horses outside, with a simple "adios." The third man waited until they had gone, then gripped my hand with a pressure that made me realise, for the first time, what it must have been like to be held by a gauntlet of steel.

"I spoke about the Good Samaritan a few hours ago," he said heartily. "That was a poor way of putting the thing, for you've given me something better than charity. We shall meet again, I dare say, one of these days, and I shan't forget that I have a debt to pay. Adios."

He went outside, and I was about to follow, when he turned abruptly, and stepping back into the cabin, shut the door behind him.

"I forgot one thing," he said quickly, fixing my eye in his queer intent way, his head thrown a little back as if he were criticising a picture, and his right hand holding my arm just below the elbow. "I told you that, if the Apaches came at all, it would be at night. You may have trouble, so keep a spy look-out when the moon's bright. And, above all, mind this"—here the grip of the fingers on my arm tightened painfully—"if you get fast asleep some time, and only wake to hear

the second whoop, and see a red devil coming at you through that door, don't stop to handle a pistol. I see you carry a sharp knife; use *that*, first on the Apache, and then upon yourself. It'll come to the same thing in the end, and will save you a bad hour. Remember poor Tom!"

He was off, and the three men galloped away at a pace somewhat different from that at which they arrived. I leant against my door-post, and meditated. How much of this talk about Indians was bunkum? What a start the fellow gave when Laura's name was mentioned! I must describe him carefully to her. Why, I had never even found out his name! I bit my lip, and changed my position uneasily. Here was a fine state of things. I, twenty-four years old, of sound mind, had allowed a stranger to worm out of me all my family news, without receiving one iota of information in return, except his adventures since the hour of noon. I groaned. What a madly idiotic thing to do! For all I knew, my story, with picturesque additions, might be spread half over the settlement in the next fortnight. A pretty business! However, it was done, and I must hope for the best. At any rate, as I was very tired, and it was past midnight, the thing to be done now was to go to sleep. This I did, in rather less than five minutes, all recollection of the cheering and suggestive advice of my dark-haired visitor having passed out of my mind.

It must have been, as far as I can calculate, about an hour later—not more—that I woke from a confused jumble of dreams with a start, as if I had received an electric shock. I lay still for a moment, with my eyes shut, a dull, oppressive sense somewhere about me, that something had happened, or was about to happen, which I ought to be doing something to prevent; what—I could not tell. As my ideas became clearer, this oppression of spirits gradually changed to vague terror, and a cold perspiration broke over me. Yet still I knew not what could be the cause. A few seconds passed; then, like a burning coal dropped upon my forehead, came remembrance of the stranger's warning.

The Indians! And I was alone—quite alone!

Yet I might be wrong. I had heard no sound. It was fancy; it was nightmare. No! Faintly from the west, but distinct and unmistakable, came a long-drawn, plaintive wail, the howl of a prairie-wolf—the cry of the Indian scout. True, it was a

long way off, but what of that? I could not run away. The only point was, whether it might not be a genuine wolf. But this would soon be ascertained, for I had picked up enough prairie-lore to know that, if this cry were an Indian's, it would soon be answered from an exactly opposite direction. With my heart in my mouth, I lay and listened. Five, ten, fifteen seconds passed. No sound. My breath came more easily; my pulse slackened its feverish speed. I even winked twice, thinking that I might really be more than half asleep; and I was just about to rise and shake myself. When—"Cruk—Cruk, Cru—uk."

The coyote's short bark, with its concluding howl, struck upon my ear like the knell of fate.

It came in an exactly opposite direction from the first. I sighed, and tried to move my right hand. My knife lay a few inches from it, yet I was so much overcome by this rigid, involuntary horror, that I had not strength enough to grasp it. I cannot say how long I remained like this; it seemed to be many hours, though in reality it could only have been a few minutes. I thought I could feel fingers moving on my hair, and hear soft breathing at my bed-side. I knew the Indians were about me, and longed to get up and strike, if it were only one good blow; yet, as if held by bands of iron, I could move neither hand nor foot. At last my senses brought me one distinct impression: the crushing of grass, the soft, regular tread of approaching feet. As this sound became more distinct, I ceased to feel the fingers in my hair. My circulation began to beat itself with every breath I drew; the life-blood coursed through my veins. My right hand was free, and I grasped my knife; the left hand became less numb, and the fingers curled joyfully round the hilt of my revolver. As I touched the familiar weapon, the deadly sensation of helplessness passed away altogether. I bounded to my feet and listened. Swish, swish; the step was outside the cabin now. There was a moment's pause, and then a figure appeared in the doorway. Raising my knife, I sprang forward with a yell.

"Steady there," said a quiet voice. "I ain't an Apache."

It was my visitor with the black beard. I am not very clear as to what happened then. A man whose nerves had been shaken as much as mine during the past few

minutes, is rather apt to lose his head when the scare is over. I have a shrewd idea that I fainted; for I can remember dropping my pistol, and feeling the cabin twisting and whirling about me, and then coming to myself upon my back, with someone holding a wet rag to my temples. Thoroughly ashamed to be caught in such a predicament, I tried to sit up and laugh.

"This is foolish work. I suppose my supper did not agree with me. I certainly thought my place was full of Indians, and that you had come to report progress about the slow fire."

My companion did not respond to this feeble attempt.

"Are you better?" he said briefly.

"Quite steady now, thanks; how ridiculous!"

"Wait a moment; let me feel your pulse. Ay, you seem to have worked round. I'll tell you my news now, for there's no time to be lost. Have you heard anything during the past few minutes?"

"I heard your step——"

"Nothing else?"

"A coyote howl or two."

"Oh, did you hear that? You know what it means, I s'pose?"

I looked intently into his face, upon which the moon shone brightly through the open doorway. Was he joking? He did not look like it.

"The Apache scout passing the word?"

"You're right." Then sharply: "Are you scared?"

"Not a bit."

And I spoke the truth. I was no longer alone. He looked at me steadily, his head on one side, as it had been when he said "good-bye."

"We-el, my friend, then I must inform you that about an hour hence, if we stay here, this dug-out will be blazing sky-high, and we—we shall be simmering gently. Therefore, you must pack up what you can carry, mount behind me on Leone there, and strike alick for the settlements. D'you see?"

I started. Until this moment I had not fully realised that he was serious.

"D'you see?" he repeated.

"Ye-es. But—but what will become of my sheep?"

Now that I was fully awake, things began to assume a new aspect altogether. If my property were confiscated, my life would not be worth much to me.

"H'm," he answered dubiously. "Indians arn't very partial to mutton if they

can get beef; but I dare say they'll have a bit of a feed."

"And about the rest? For they can't eat two thousand."

"The rest? We—el, I fear they'll go off on the dead jump. Either toward the river or the mesa; both, most likely; dividing into two or three bunches. No, it'll be rather a bad business for them, but it can't be helped. Are you ready?"

I thought over the thing for a moment, and then made up my mind.

"No, thanks."

"What's in the way? The pony won't kick us off."

"That's not it. I shall not leave my sheep to Apaches."

"But what good——"

"Wait. You would say that if I'm strung up, it won't help the stock much. No. But not long ago, you said a sheep-man was not in so much danger as a cowboy. There's a chance that they might let me off. Then I thought of driving the sheep towards the home-ranche, so that if I were seized, the stock, with their heads in the right direction, might get home in safety. I'll chance it, thank you. You clear back to town."

I was off the bed now; all weakness gone. I had never felt better in my life.

My companion made no reply, but silently watched me as I opened a fire-proof cash-box under my pillow, and drew from it a packet of letters—the last Laura had written—and buckled on my revolver and knife. I was now ready to go.

We went outside together. How quiet and peaceful everything was! The air delightfully cool and sweet; the sky cloudless; and above our heads the moon, sailing clear and bright. There was little time to think of these things, however, for I glanced quickly at the sheep, and uttered an exclamation. They had arisen from their bedding-ground, as they will sometimes on a moonlight night, and were steadily trailing off in long lines—towards the home-ranche.

I turned my face the other way, and noticed that a fresh breeze was springing up from the west. Bright moonlight, and a strong wind in our favour; nothing could be better. I now thought of the man who had ridden back, at much risk, to warn me.

"Good-bye, sir. Don't think me ungrateful. But I cannot desert my sheep. They are all I have."

He was mounted by this time; but to my surprise refused my proffered hand.

"I see," he replied gruffly. "And now we'll drop conversation. It'll be the safest plan. Maybe they will think this is merely a wandering flock, if they should hear the bells."

"But you are not coming with me?"

He grunted and turned his horse, saying, as he paced off to stir up some laggards on the hill:

"Good gosh, man, what sort of a hair-pin do you take me to be, in the devil's name? You see to the left side of the flock, and I'll keep up the right. Vamos, now."

He loped away, and we were presently in motion, the camp fading quickly away behind us, in the grey, ghostly haze.

On and on—not a word, not a look—each walking at a steady pace, urging the laggards gently, and carefully guiding the foremost by the winding creek which ran beside Eagle Tail Rancho, five miles away. On and on, until I could scarcely remember when the drive first began, and hardly expected it ever to end; for, the first excitement being over, a great reaction of drowsy listlessness had set in. Thanks, however, to the bright moonlight and fresh wind, the sheep went on without stop or stay, now and then giving a gentle baa, but mostly in silence, only the soft rumble of their many feet breaking the stillness of the night. Suddenly I saw the vague outline of my companion's figure remain motionless; then he wheeled toward me, and galloped up.

"Look," he said laconically, pointing to the west. Far, far behind us a red wavering light was creeping up, now rising, now falling, again rising, until it became a steady glare. It was my camp-house burning. The Indians were there.

We watched it silently, for a while. Then my friend observed meditatively:

"Well, the fun is over for to-night. Our scalps are safe. I'm glad we didn't leave the sheep."

"How far off are we?" I had lost all sense of distance.

"Four miles, good. See, the sheep have got wind of home now. Hear that baa? Those wethers at the head are making for the water below your partner's rancho. And I must go."

"But you will come in with me?" I said quickly. "I insist upon it; you can't refuse if you've any decent feeling in you."

But he only smiled, and shook his head.

"No, sir, not to-night. Your partner will be quite awakened up enough by you and your story, without seeing me. Adios. I have not paid my debt yet, I know. But I will one of these days. Adios!"

And away he rode without another word. I looked helplessly after him. Who was he? What was he? Why had I not asked his name? Well, it was too late to wish. I must follow my sheep, and retail the news of the day to Jack. I should think he would be somewhat astonished for once in his life.

CHAPTER II.

HOW I MET MIKE ALISON THE SECOND TIME.

I WAS much mistaken when I imagined that the simple unvarnished tale I had to tell would disturb the equanimity of my partner, Jack Temple. He growled at being roused up so early in the morning, it was true; but took no interest whatever in the identity of the queer stranger, and when I described the misadventures of my visitor and the burning of the cabin, he only shrugged his shoulders, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Ah—ha, Harry; so you've brushed against the reds at last, and had your first taste of the bitters of Western life. I'm glad you came out of it with your hair on; but you ran a tidy risk, by sticking to those sheep. Eh? I told you that Apaches were a mild race, did I? Well, so they are, four years out of five. And now that I think of it, exactly five years ago Heman's rancho, over the hill here, was burnt; and half-a-dozen of us sat in this place expecting that our turn would come before morning. But it didn't. It's a terrible nuisance having the flock bundling home at this time of year. However, things will be quiet enough in a week, and then we'll rebuild the dug-out and put José in it. I've thought of making a small corral for the fine-grade rams, which are due in October, so you will have plenty of work for the next month. Then there'll be dipping and carting the furniture from Trinidad to your place, and after that—don't stand grinning there, you ape! Go and cut some firewood. There's many a slip—and she's not out yet!"

The next four weeks passed quickly enough. I was working "to time." There were three hundred cedar posts, six feet

six inches in length, to be carted from the Mesa, two miles away, where they had been cut by a Mexican by contract, at the rate of five cents per post. Then three trenches had to be dug, two feet in depth, the width of the spade, and fifty feet in length. In these the posts were placed side by side, and the earth around them "tamped" down to give firmness and stability; and lastly a waggon-load of long saplings had to be cut from the banks of the Chicareeka River, a mile to the west of the Round Mound, and bound horizontally across the outer side of the wall of cedar.

One afternoon, in the fourth week after I left camp, I heard a halloo from the house. Jack was on the porch, his arms buried in a huge wash-tub, where some flannel shirts were undergoing a process of rough and ready scrubbing that spoke well for the stoutness of their material.

"Oh! say! Harry, have you seen the horses anywhere round? I guess they're off on the bust, as they've been running for a week. I want to go to Trinidad to-morrow. Only remembered it this morning."

He paused to wring out his shirt. The drift of his remarks was obvious.

"Shall I bring them in for you, and finish the corral to-morrow?"

"Yes. Hurry up. You won't have more than a clear hour before sundown, and the deuce only knows where you'll find the brutes. Keep to the mesa."

In ten minutes I was in the saddle, briskly loping toward Eagle Tail Mountain, only too glad to vary my employment.

Hunting horses, on the prairie, however, is like many other occupations in this world, a pleasant pastime to begin with, but, if not speedily attended with success, soon becoming a wearisome and disappointing task. I went first of all to the usual haunts of the ponies, but could find no sign of their presence. Then I worked westward, winding in and out of the foot of the mountain, scanning the rocks above, and the prairie below, and wondering, as I went on, whether it were possible for the perverse brutes to have climbed the mesa, and be feeding on the table-land; in which case there would be a hunt before me of tall dimensions. The wind blew cold and fresh, and reminded me that in my haste to be off, I had forgotten my coat, and that an evening ride should not be undertaken in shirt and canvas trousers only. There was no help for it though; these ponies must be found before dark. I pushed on faster, much to the disgust of my horse, a

cow-pony (that is, a pony trained to handle wild cattle), of mature age and experience, who, though he could stretch his long limbs when he pleased at a speed which many a colt might envy, was much adverse to going far from the stable at this time of day. His anxiety to return to hay and meditations was expressed by a passive edging round in the direction of the ranche, whenever he thought I was off my guard.

We were now about seven miles from home. To the north I could see my old camp, and the wind wafted a faint baa towards me, showing that José was already busy with his supper. This sight and sound reminded me of my last night at camp. It seemed far more than four weeks ago. I had ridden to Stockton several times since, and eagerly scanned the loafers about the saloon and the travellers busy with dinner in the restaurant below, hoping that I might chance to meet my friend again. But I had not found him, and, remembering the wandering propensities of the cowboy community, I doubted much if I should do so this summer.

I turned sharply to the left. The ground fell away rather steeply here, for nearly parallel with this side of the mesa ran the Chicareeka River, a narrow silver streak with high banks; in spring a turbid torrent, with the weight of the melted mountain snow upon it, and a place to be carefully avoided by the herder with a thirsty flock under his care.

The space between river and mesa became narrower and narrower, until it was a mere bridle-path. The sun had sunk to rest ten minutes ago, and my chances of finding these rambling horses before night began to look rather small. The prospect was not a pleasant one, for I could hardly go home without them, and the prairie is cold at night. On my left towered the mesa, gloomy and dark; on the right lay the river, a dark belt of green; beyond, the prairie, skirted by foot-hills, the snowy ridge of peaks looming in the dim distance. I was getting tired and cross, and relaxed my hold of the reins to change my seat. Instantly old Comanche turned his head to wheel on a homeward track. But, just as I was about to put him straight with somewhat unnecessary vigour, the old horse came round himself, and, to my great astonishment, began to step briskly forward, pricking up his ears and raising his crest as he advanced. I let him go his own pace, and waited patiently for the explanation of these proceedings.

Had we come upon the ponies at last? This was apparently the case, for Comanche neighed loudly at the moment, his call being answered from what seemed the depths of the mountain. No spur was needed now. With a long, swinging stride the old horse swept down the winding path, and brought himself to with a promptness rather inconvenient to his rider, before a narrow opening between two rugged cones of rock. A twitch of the bridle and touch of the heel sent him through it with great quickness, and, after following a narrow track for twenty yards or so, I found myself at the entrance of a spacious cañon.

I now saw the reason for Comanche's excitement. At the further end of a large semi-circle of thickly-growing grass were some twenty horses; two or three picketed out, the rest loose, all feeding for dear life on the fresh, green pasture. Nearer to me a huge camp-fire was blazing, round which were lounging a dozen men, and at the head of the cañon, where a narrow stream of water trickled among the rocks, was another man, kneeling and busily scraping the bottom of a large frying-pan with gravel.

Upon my appearance the loafers at the fire turned their heads, and two or three sat up and stared at me; but none made a move in my direction except the man with the pan. He promptly desisted from his labours and came towards me with a steady stride.

It was now dusk; but before the camp-master had advanced within speaking distance, I recognised my old acquaintance with the restless eyes. I greeted him warmly, and was answered in a quiet, composed tone; but the grip he gave my hand, and his gleaming smile, were more expressive than a flow of words.

"Out late!"

"Yes; I'm hunting horses. I suppose you have not seen two mares in this locality?"

"A bay and a black, branded with a T on the near fore shoulder?"

"The identical team. Where are they?"

"In my bunch here. They joined it an hour ago."

"How very lucky! Will you give me a hand to cut them out? I'm learning to ride by degrees, but am not perfect yet, my business being sheep-raising; and among these rocks, at this hour, the job will be an awkward one."

"Won't you camp here to-night then,

and cut 'em out in the morning? Your partner will know that you can take care of yourself."

While he was speaking I sniffed a delightful odour of broiled steak. It was an offer not to be refused.

"Thanks, I will."

"I should say, by-the-by," he said hastily, "that we're rough here. Do you mind that?"

This was amusing. What did he take me for?

"I hope not. It is true that I've not been quite a year out; but for all that I'm a Western stockman, and not afraid of Western company."

He nodded, and without further remark led the way to a large rock, where lay blankets and a saddle.

"Put your gear here, with mine. We'll sleep together. Turn the pony loose; he'll run with the rest; then come to supper."

I did as I was bid, and presently made my way to the fire, and stretched myself at ease, while my friend, with the assistance of two others—whom I recognised to be the men I had housed at sheep-camp, and who nodded slightly in reply to my greeting—prepared the meal.

It was a good one. Juicy beef-steak, eaten with Mexican cakes, made of dough and a pinch of soda, kneaded and pressed out to wafer-like thinness by the fingers, placed in the pan on bubbling melted bacon-fat, and fried to a delicate crispness—all washed down by coffee which a fastidious Frenchman would have found no fault with. After this, pipes and conversation.

The talk was at first confined to the other men, the camp-master and myself puffing in silence; and it was not long before I began to realise vividly the significance of my friend's allusion to rough company.

I had been accustomed to hear subjects freely discussed round a camp-fire that should be left alone; but there was a keen and brutal relish of sickening and disgusting details to-night, which made my face burn to the tips of my ears.

I was pleased to see that my friend took no part in the talk; and I turned eagerly to him as he removed his pipe to ask a question in a pause of the conversation:

"Been in town lately?"

"Last week."

"Any news?"

"Yes, they say Dempster's got all his horses back but one. Poor beggar! He's

had a hard time of it. Twenty ponies taken in one night, and one a mare worth five hundred dollars. He had to go as far as Albuquerque before he could get her."

My companion nodded; then leaned back comfortably against a little hillock behind him, again removed his pipe from his lips, and observed coolly:

"Yes, I heard that old Dempster found his stable empty one morning. Kind of served the old cuss right, didn't it?"

I sat bolt upright, and put my pipe away. It was a subject upon which I held a very strong opinion, and which I now proceeded to ventilate, my eyes fixed steadily upon the burning log at my feet.

"Served him right, you say? Well, I've heard that remark before, and I must confess I cannot see the justice of it a bit. Take for granted that he's a mean, grasping, hard-hearted curmudgeon; and that if he'd had a grain of right feeling in him he would have sent someone on his first horse for a doctor the other day, when his cowboy's child fell ill; yet you cannot prove it to be right or reasonable that a band of irresponsible men should swoop down directly afterwards, and rob him of every horse he possessed."

"But, if this were the only way in which he could be adequately punished? Old Dem is as hard and mean as a Government mule, and rich as he can stick. His horses are the only thing he cares about—besides, after all, you say he got 'em back."

"No thanks to those who stole them, though. See what he paid, and then, remember what happened to Jake Blundell, the County Sheriff, when he came up to the horse-stealers with his posse."

There was a movement behind me. The conversation among the men had ceased. They were apparently about to turn in. Some had risen to their feet; and were fumbling in their belts. All were silent, and everyone, though that I scarcely noticed, was looking fixedly at me.

"It was the greatest farce that was ever heard of," I went on, warming into my subject; "the behaviour of that Sheriff and his posse. Thirty men, well-armed and well-mounted, all cowed and turned from what they had solemnly sworn to do, by a dozen, and the only excuse—a fear of the leader of the gang, Mike Alison. This man faced the Sheriff, I believe, alone, with his men posted among the rocks. Fine courage! thirty afraid of one! Yet it is said that Jake Blundell was a Texan ranger in the Mexican War, and is as brave a man as

ever lived. I can't understand it. Can you?"

"Wa-al, it appears somewhat out of the way, certainly," he replied slowly. "But it is true that Jake's clear grit. A better Sheriff was never appointed."

"Then why was he afraid of Mike Alison?" I said sharply. "I am astonished at hearing so much of this man, as if he were the only one in this part of the world who could shoot. There's a reward of five thousand dollars offered for him alive or dead, yet he is able by the mere power of his name and reputation to walk into a town in broad daylight, and never a word spoken, or a revolver raised! Perhaps it is because I've not been out of England long; but that such men as he and his gang should live a week unhung, in the midst of a respectable community such as this, seems to me monstrous."

I now paused for breath, expecting my friend to reply; but, instead of his quiet voice, there came another directly behind me, harsh in tone and hoarse with passion.

"Is that so, stranger? Then, by heaven! when your tongue slips again, be more careful who you're blattin' to!"

I sprang up, breathlessly.

The piñon log was blazing, and for fifteen yards around it was as light as day. Standing within three feet of me was a tall man, holding a cocked revolver in his right hand, and a bare knife in his left. By his long, brown hair, and handsome face, I knew him to be the youngest of my visitors at camp, Kit Blossie.

A little further away were the others, each caressing a knife or pistol, though only Kit's were formally presented at me. All were eyeing me, however, with the impressive and critical interest I remembered noticing in the face of a pig-killer at a Chicago hog-factory, when his first victim was being placed into position. Of course the truth flashed across my mind instantly. The very men I had been so vigorously apostrophising were before me. I set my teeth, and tried to control myself, and do the right thing: which, without doubt, ought to have been an ample apology. Alas! a free tongue was not my only weakness; and there was something so rasping, and contemptuous about the tone of Kit Blossie, that, despite my consciousness of being in fault, and notwithstanding the fact that my life hung by the slenderest thread that a life may, my temper rose to boiling point, and no apology would come; only hot, hasty words.

"Well, sir, I expressed the opinion for which I was asked. I did not know what your profession was. You may go to the devil!"

There was a general laugh at this. A low, quiet laugh. The muscles of the grim faces—looking darker and more sinister than even nature had intended, lit up as they were by the flickering fire-light—never relaxed a hair's breadth. The sound which came from them was dry, and more significant than oaths.

The man in front of me seemed to grow taller, as, with a smart click, he brought his revolver to the ready, pointing the muzzle at my feet.

"So!" he said sneeringly. "Then we must let go, I s'pose. Wait till I count ten, boys. If he's on his knees before, and ready to repeat the words I'll put into his mouth, p'raps we'll forgive his blasted impertinence. If not——" he concluded his sentence with a grim chuckle. There was an approving murmur from the others. Then Kit began to count, raising his pistol inch by inch.

"One."

I shifted my position slightly. Kit stepped quickly forward, and stood directly over me.

"Two."

My breath came quick and short. I withdrew my eyes from him, with an effort, and looked round. Every man but one was holding a revolver after the manner of Kit Blossie, and as "Three" was pronounced, raised the muzzle of his weapon some six inches. The only one passive in the matter was the man who had befriended me at camp. His face was turned away, and he appeared to be perfectly unconscious that anything unusual was going on. I felt a keen pang of disappointment. True, he was but one among thirteen, and if he should take my part, might share my fate. Nevertheless, when I remembered his parting words a month ago, it was hard to be deserted in time of need.

"Four."

I turned again, and faced the man who spoke. The first sensation of helpless rage was wearing off. My nerves hardened, and my pulse grew steady before the sharp, cold edge of imminent danger. What should I do?

"Five, Six, Seven."

He was counting faster; the revolver rising higher and higher, pointing now just below my breast.

Should I submit? It was a revolting thing to do; besides, it would be of little use, if the stories I had heard of the refined and relentless cruelty of the horse-stealers were true.

"Eight."

Yet I could not stand still, and be butchered like a calf in a slaughter-house. I measured my enemy carefully, and raised myself on tip-toe. I was two inches shorter than he, but broader in the shoulders; I remembered old college days, when I had held a boxing championship for two terms; and I drew a long, deep breath.

"Nine."

The word was spoken slowly; and the revolver was now on a level with my chin; but he got no further. With all my force I sprang upon him, delivering a heavy blow on the upper part of his nose.

My action was so sudden, and, I believe, so unexpected, that, though Kit pulled the trigger of his revolver, it was too late, and the bullet flew wide of its mark. It was a touch and go, for the man had a knife, which he knew well how to use, and he was big and strong; as it was, however, excitement gave a force to my blows, which proved too much for him. At the first he staggered, at the second, a right-hander on the line of the jawbone, just below the ear, he threw up his arms, and measured his length on the grass.

Flushed with the victory, I turned to the rest; then caught my breath, for eleven pairs of eyes were glaring at me, meaning business; and, below, eleven revolvers were pointed at my head.

Crack! The report echoed and re-echoed with the murderous clang; but I fell on my back, unhurt. Someone had gripped my ankle, as I turned from settling with Kit Blossie, and tripped me up. The bullets flew over my head.

As I lay, half-stunned by my fall, I felt fingers round my throat, and a knee upon my chest. Then came the click of a pistol-lock.

They would not have much trouble now. I was helpless in very truth. I kept my teeth and eyes tightly closed. Why didn't they do their business?

And now I heard someone speaking just above me. It was not Kit's voice, but the quiet tone of the man whom I thought had left me to my fate.

"Boys," it said—and sweeter music a poor wretch never heard—"there's been enough of this. I like fun, but we don't want any more to-night. Did you speak,

Pete Worrall? Well, out with it, then!" An emphatic dissent had interrupted my friend's last words, and I heard the third of my camp-companions chime in.

"P'raps you don't know, Boss, that Kit's about dead?—his face smashed in, any way!"

"Is that so?" was the quiet reply. "Well, I'm glad to hear it, very glad to hear it. It is about time he should learn that bully-ragging don't always pay. Have you anything more to say?"

There was no answer. After waiting a few seconds, my friend continued:

"I said, boys, that there'd been enough of this; and I meant it. This is a free country, and everyone has a right to his opinion. Besides, this boy here, when Pete and Kit and myself escaped from the Apaches by the skin of our teeth the other day, took us in, gave us the best of what he had, and treated us as not another rancheman living would have done. So just remember this, all of you: If there's a man here, or anywhere, who hankers after the shortest cut to hell, he'd better try to put a hole into Harry Thornton—this boy here. I'll take care he ain't disappointed, and I generally keep my word. Now turn in."

The grip on my throat slackened, and the knee was withdrawn from my chest. Accepting the hint, I got up. The log of pitch-pine was now a mass of red embers, but there was still light enough to distinguish the figures of the horse-stealers. The group was scattered now, two or three unrolling blankets, the rest sitting lazily before the fire, as if they had never left it. I noticed the crowd very little, however, my thoughts full of one thing only—the identity of the man who had now saved my life for the second time. He was standing near me, and at this moment passed me my hat. I pressed his hand. If I am to confess the truth, there was a lump at the back of my throat that made a considerable effort necessary and before I could speak distinctly.

"Thank you," I said; "thank you for what you've done to-night. I don't know what to say about it. There's nothing I can say, except that if I can ever do the same for you I will. But there is one thing I must know. What is your name? I told you mine. Won't you return the confidence?"

I was still holding his hand, but now he drew it away, and I heard him give a short, sharp sigh.

"Yes, I'll tell you my name if you like,

though you'll wish you'd kept your hand to yourself. We can never be friends, Thornton. *I am Mike Alison.*"

CHAPTER III.

HOW THE NEWS CAME TO STOCKTON.

So the man, to whom I had given my fullest confidence, was Mike Alison himself; one who, as the phrase goes, "kills a man for the pleasure of seeing him fall." This was a revelation calculated to afford material for painful reflection. Yet, perhaps, because I was tired; perhaps on account of the sudden transition from the sudden extremity of danger to a feeling of perfect safety, I slept the whole night through. I cannot remember ever passing a better night than this when I lay on the ground side by side with Mike Alison. I dropped asleep two minutes after my head touched the pillow, and the sun was up before I opened my eyes again. I expected a little awkwardness at breakfast, and, in fact, not much conversation was put in. I looked round for Kit Blossie, but he was not to be seen, nor was Pete Worrall. For reasons of their own they kept apart, and the other men made no allusion to last night's incident.

As the last rasher of bacon disappeared, and the men began to fill our pipes, Mike Alison called one of them.

"Tim," he said quietly, as if it were not a command, but an invitation, "get on your pony and cut out those two that we picked up last night. When you've done that, rope the bay horse with the T brand and bring him here."

In fifteen minutes my ponies were on the prairie, and at the mouth of the cañon I was holding Comanche, ready to go. Mike Alison had been as good as his word. I grasped his hand warmly in farewell; he returned the pressure, and smiled.

"Adios, young man. Well—shake hands then, if you will. Remember now what I said: here men fight with pistols, not fists. This is not the Old Country. When you want to let out upon some other fellow, shoot him, don't knock him down. Adios."

He turned and left me.

An hour's brisk gallop brought me to the ranche. I prefer not to repeat Jack's remarks when he heard my adventures of the previous night. There are some people who can never hear of a friend doing a foolish thing without commenting upon it in a manner which makes him feel like a bear

on a hot plate. Suffice it to say that I became a bear on a hot plate. Happily for me, Jack had no time to make me dance, because he was in a hurry to get to town.

And there was a letter for me, oh, great Heavens! There was a letter!

What did it matter if Jack laughed and chaffed, and made me feel what a hot-headed fool I had made myself when I found that letter.

Did I say, before we began to talk so much about Mike Alison, that Laura—my Laura, you know—had actually left Liverpool? She had, and now she wrote me the sweetest and fondest of letters—cruelly short—just to say that in five days—five days, think of it, only four days after the arrival of her note—she would be with me.

"And, dear Harry," she said, "if you are not too busy"—too busy! as if I could be too busy—"you can ride over to Stockton"—Stockton was the nearest coach-station—"and meet us. Till then, good-bye, my dearest Harry."

She wrote from New York, where they were to stay two or three days before leaving Eastern civilisation.

She was accompanied by her guardian and uncle, Mr. Geoffrey Temple. It was plucky of the old man, at sixty-five, to travel all the way from London to New Mexico, in order to see his niece married with his own eyes. But he was fond of her, which I daresay was the reason why he had made himself so confoundedly disagreeable about the engagement. Certainly he did his level best to break it off and to prevent our union.

He honestly considered that I was going, with my eyes open, to doom Laura to a life of hardship, danger, and poverty, and that I ought to have left England without speaking to her again. And, of course, I could never forget that when my poor father died suddenly, and I left college with only a thousand pounds in the world, Mr. Temple did all in his power to prevent me from seeing her, though we had been engaged a year, and my darling had told him she would never give me up. Indeed, had I not seen her eager, tearful face watching for me at the window at Temple Hall, I should have gone out West without a word, and we might never have met again.

What did all this matter? The good old man gave way when he saw that Laura's happiness depended upon it; and,

besides, he never had any personal objections to me; and I am glad to bear testimony to the splendid courage of a man of his age, accustomed to a quiet English country life, who deliberately undertook, for the sake of his niece, a journey of five thousand miles, and cheerfully went through discomforts such as few quiet and orderly Englishmen ever dream of.

Oh, but there was work to do within the next four days! The ranche had to be cleaned, and scrubbed, and set to rights from top to bottom; and then there was the "dipping," an important process which has to be performed once a year by the sheepmen of the Western territories. You will understand the trouble when I tell you that every single animal of the whole flock—in our case, five thousand in number—has to be immersed completely in hot tobacco juice.

At our ranche, this year, I do not believe we should ever have got through the business at all—for the wretched people who supplied the tobacco sent it a week later than they should have done, our tank leaked, and our furnace wouldn't burn properly—if it had not been our good fortune to secure the services of Kirk Troy. Why Kirk Troy was called by everybody Kirk Troy the Idiot, puzzled me until he had lived with us a week or more. He was a tall, handsome fellow, broad in the shoulder and lean in the flank, with a cadaverous, melancholy face, of which a pendulous under-lip, hanging loosely when he was not speaking, was the only feature to convey a suggestion that he was not quite "all there." His nose was large and prominent, starting out suddenly from between a pair of mild brown eyes: and he was the most patient, docile, hard-working creature ever seen. Yet, though patience and docility were marked characteristics of Kirk Troy, his nature had another side.

There was a story that a few years before, Kirk being at the time alone, in sheep camp, an unfortunate Mexican stole into his cabin with intent to pilfer; there he was found by the master, in the act of cutting the throat of a troublesome puppy, which had disputed his entrance. This Mexican was never seen again. A traveller passing the camp next day saw a mound of new earth at the roadside, and asked its meaning. "Well, sir," said Kirk, "there was a funeral here this morning. I am fond of dogs;" and he mildly asked the traveller if he would spend the night

in his cabin. This man found, however, that he had urgent business elsewhere.

Apart from this anecdote, a fellow with more blameless reputation than Kirk Troy it would have been hard to find. Yet he had a history. He was the son of a Californian farmer, who had immigrated into New Mexico, to raise sheep when Kirk was still a boy. At eighteen, he was the owner of a flock of a thousand head of Mexican ewes, and with capital prospects, being a quiet and sober fellow and already a first-rate stockman. He had three brothers, who settled down on farms of their own, one by one, leaving him, the youngest, tending his sheep alone, living the solitary camp-life most of the year of which I had just been having an experience.

Kirk Troy was a shy and reserved man, though at that time as sane as any one. People laughed, and said they pitied any girl who should care for him, as he would never have the pluck to propose. They were mistaken. A young lady, Miss Jenny Maliber, of St. Louis, came to a neighbouring town to spend the summer. Kirk saw a good deal of her, and from the first day they met, he began to lose his nervous shyness. She was clever, vivacious, and pretty; he, gentle in manner, handsome in face, with the physical strength of six ordinary men. That Jenny was a flirt was undeniable, but this did not prevent Kirk from loving her; his affection being returned—for a time. By-and-by they became engaged; then she went home, and he settled down with strong hands and will to make his pile and win her. But it was never to be. A month from the time she arrived in St. Louis, Miss Jenny had nearly forgotten her frontier lover; in another month she only remembered the tie between them sufficiently to feel that it was insupportable; and she wrote asking to be set free. No one saw Kirk for months after this letter reached him—the first he had ever received in his life. Then he quietly told his friends what had happened, and asked for the subject not to be touched upon by any one. He never complained, and no one dared to say a word against her in his presence. His way of life remained unaltered; he went on tending his sheep in camp, and appeared at intervals among his fellow men the same gentle creature he had always been. People wondered, even his own brothers, that he took it so quietly. Quietly! They did not know what was going on in that silent brain.

For seven years Kirk went his solitary

way, and then it became evident to everybody that his mind was affected. He stammered slightly in his speech; he would sit for hours, if he had nothing particular to do, crouching in a chair, staring vacantly before him, motionless, except for a ceaseless movement of the hands, now passing one over the other, now interlacing the fingers tightly, and again rubbing the palms together, round and round with a slow regular motion. The break-up of the intellect came gradually. Even when I knew him, a year after it had been first noticed, he would behave at times exactly like other people, and, as I have already stated, his power of handling sheep was unsurpassable. We, therefore, considered ourselves fortunate to be able to engage him through the winter months as foreman herder.

With Kirk Troy's help the dipping was concluded the day before I was due in Stockton. And, by this time, also, thanks to Sarah Brunt—a spinster of forty years—big and bony—who was to be Laura's housekeeper when the new place at El Gato Creek was in a fit state of habitation—Eagle Tail Rancho presented an appearance of cleanliness and comfort never before seen.

All was ready, therefore, in time; and on the fourth day after receiving Laura's letter, I rose before dawn, and groomed all the horses thoroughly, to their immense astonishment. Then I spent an hour in cleaning my best pair of plated spurs, and my new ivory-handled revolver. By ten all preparations were complete. I had donned my grey buckskin suit, and Comanche held his head high with the pride of bearing a brand-new, fifty-dollar Californian saddle. Jack stood by as I prepared to mount, and composedly lit his matutinal pipe.

"Adios, my boy. Mind the old horse don't buck you off. You shouldn't have given him that extra feed of corn last night. Don't forget to order a few hundred rounds of rifle cartridges. If your new friend, Mike Alison, pays us a visit, we shall want all we can get."

I laughed and rode away; but Jack was more in earnest than he appeared to be. He had never been really comfortable in his mind since my acquaintance with Mike began.

"Of all the foolish things you ever did, Harry," he said emphatically, "shaking hands with that cuss was the worst. You never know what such a man as he mayn't do, or try to do."

This morning Jack's allusion to Mike made very little impression upon me indeed. My thoughts were dwelling on other things. After one brisk spurt I travelled gently. The coach could not arrive before two at the earliest; and I did not wish to be obliged to loaf about town for a couple of hours.

A Western pony has only two paces: when his rider is on particular business, such as hunting cattle or horses, he strikes out at the lope, or canter, quickening to a gallop when the animals are in view; at other times he ambles, but he never trots. The reason for this is, that Western men ride with long stirrups, and never rise from the saddle by so much as an inch, no matter what their horses are about.

My journey this day was at the "pace." I made my way leisurely northward, along the apology for a road, which only deserved its name in this dry weather, being nothing more than two narrow tracks where the grass had been worn away by the passage of heavy waggons. I glanced at old familiar landmarks as I passed them with a quiet smile. It was the last time I should pass them alone. I reached the little wooden bridge which spanned the Chicareeka, the same river which, a few miles further down, curved to the south and met the Eagle Tail Mesa. I examined this structure critically, noting for the first time that its supports seemed old and worm-eaten. I thought that I should not like to take Laura many times across the bridge before it had been strengthened. Then I passed on across a broad meadow covered with sage-brush, where the Jack rabbits bounded away on either side, not followed to-day by a pistol bullet. Next came a gentle rise of prairie, at the other side of which was a winding watercourse, crossed by a gravelly ford.

I turned aside here for a few minutes. A hundred yards away stood a square house, with a high-peaked shingle roof, and walls of dark-red colour: a four-roomed house of one storey, and newly built, the window-panes shining with fresh white paint, and a Mexican at this very moment putting the last coat of varnish on the front door. The man smiled when he saw me, and raised his hat. It was my own little homestead, very nearly ready for Laura.

The furniture was still in its packing-cases as it had arrived from the East. I had promised Laura that I would touch nothing inside until she was there to see

and approve. Outside, however, everything was done, and the bright October sun shone joyously upon the trim stable, two hundred yards away, surrounded by capacious sheep and horse corrals; on the strip of ploughed land nearer the creek, where we would plant the garden next year; and upon two long, deep pools below, the best bit of water El Gato Creek could boast. A wire fence enclosed the whole, and ensured immunity from stray cattle and horses; for I had paid for this homestead, in hard cash, the price of my first year's crop of wool.

After inspecting the latest arrangements and conversing awhile with Ilario Gallegos, the foreman builder, I turned back upon the road, and presently reached Stockton, a town thirty-five miles south-west of Trinidad, which was the last point reached by the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fé Railroad.

Stockton was a quiet and sleepy place at this time—the fall of 1879. A few months later it was stirred to its depths by the railroad, changed its name, and became a city; but as yet it consisted of no more than a dozen dwellings. One was a pretentious three-storied structure, combining the advantages of hotel, restaurant, post-office, and saloon. It was built partly of adobe and partly of wood, and was hideously ugly. Opposite, was Gillespie's Store, a long, low, log-house, where every article required by Western men, from a needle to a repeating rifle, could be procured at prices, called by the proprietor, reasonable. And, scattered among the turns and curves of the Chicareeka Creek—a tributary to the river—were a few ranches, homes of the earliest settlers in these parts.

Stockton had been a station as far back as 1860, and a well-known spot to pioneers for thirty years. It was called after its founder, Old Tom Stockton, the first white man who ever settled in Northern New Mexico.

I hitched Comanche to a convenient post before the hotel, made my way to the bar, and asked for letters. I did not expect any, but made the customary request on the chance, and was rewarded by finding a really long epistle from Laura, who had employed a spare hour on the way, before starting upon her long journey.

The place was empty when I arrived, but presently two men strolled in, one of whom shook hands with me heartily. This was Mr. Josiah Gillespie, owner of

the store opposite, and a very good friend of ours.

He was a little man, clean shaved, except for a heavy military moustache; with a sallow face, that never changed either in colour or expression under any conceivable circumstances. His eyes were brown and very bright, the shrewd eyes of an American man of business; he was dressed neatly in black, with spotless linen.

The man who accompanied him was a marked contrast in dress and appearance. A very heavily built fellow, with the biggest chest I ever saw, and standing six feet six inches in his stockings. He had a face like a square block of brown rock; big black eyes under shaggy brows tinged with grey; and he was dressed in riding costume of brown leather overalls, flannel shirt, and a broad-brimmed grey felt hat. Round his waist was a broad belt, filled with cartridges and carrying a pair of Colt's revolvers. He held a whip in his right hand, and a short repeating Winchester carbine in his left, which he carelessly balanced between his finger and thumb. I knew who this must be at once, though we had not met before. It was Jake Blundell, the Sheriff—that is to say, police inspector—for the county.

"Well, Harry," said Mr. Gillespie, signing to the bar-keeper to bring cocktails for three, "so you're here to time! I suppose your folk are well on their way now past Raton. Did you know that my daughter Nep was in Trinidad?"

"I heard something of it, sir. Jack told me she was going."

Mr. Gillespie's eyes twinkled.

"Jack? Of course he did. Knew of it before I did, I believe. Is he there?"

I shook my head and smiled.

"He has too much to do this time."

I now raised my glass, and was about to taste its contents, when I heard a whispered oath from the Sheriff and a soft whistle from Mr. Gillespie, which made me put it quickly down. The very person we had been speaking of and imagined to be thirty miles away, was before us—Neptuna Gillespie. I can see the girl now, as she ran up the steps in her picturesque riding dress, with its embroidered buckskin bodice, and light grey habit. She wore a soft felt hat, trimmed with a gleaming rattlesnake skin, below which her dark hair had escaped from the snood which bound it, and fell over her shoulders in glorious confusion. Her face was oval like

her father's, her complexion dark brunette, and her eyes large and full. They were keen, courageous eyes, and had looked mankind in the face without a thought of self-consciousness all her life. Her nose was small, slightly retroussé; the mouth a very firm one, the lips just now tightly pressed together. In figure Nep was slight and delicate, but lithe and well-proportioned as a young leopard; every movement full of a free, careless grace, which only true life in the country could have given her—the wild, free life of the Western plains. This was not a moment, however, in which to make a study of her personal appearance. Before we had time to ask a question, or express surprise, she had passed by her father and myself, and laid her hand upon Jake Blundell's arm.

"Oh, I am so glad to have found you, Mr. Blundell!" she said in a breathless tone—and now we noticed that she had been riding hard, the very brim of her hat being covered with dust. "I feared that you had left town. A terrible thing will happen, unless you can interfere at once." She paused a moment for breath.

"What is it?" said the Sheriff briefly, in a business-like tone.

"First, I must tell you that the morning stage broke down, before it had gone more than a mile out of Trinidad. You may have heard—" here she seemed to catch sight of me for the first time, and she stopped a minute; breaking out then in a choking voice:

"Oh, I am so sorry for you, Harry; oh, I am so sorry—so very sorry—but there is not time to tell my news gently. Every minute is precious."

She turned again to the Sheriff; and I stood close behind, and listened to her story silently, with set teeth and whitening lips.

"When the coach broke down—a wheel had come off, I think—the driver got on one of the mules and rode back to town for help. While he was away a buggy with two men in it drove past the wreck, and, pulling up, offered, for a small sum, to take two of the passengers as far as Stockton, if any were anxious to reach the place without delay. The offer was taken by an old gentleman and a young lady. When the stage driver came back, and found what had happened, he was nearly wild, for he knew these men—oh, Harry, keep cool!—they were those two devils and desperadoes, Pete Worrall and Kit Blossie."

Nep stopped again; for Jake upon

hearing these names forgot her presence, and growled out a heavy oath, bringing his fist down upon the counter with a mighty bang. He made no other remark, however, and the girl continued:

"Happily, John Foster, the driver, is a man of presence of mind. He got on another mule at once, and galloped back to town with the news. I heard it first, for the friend I was staying with keeps the hotel where the passengers slept last night, and John and I together tried all we knew to raise a posse to follow these villains. But would you believe it? We could not get a man to go. Oh!" exclaimed the girl, stamping her foot, tears of rage in her eyes, "what cowards men are who live in towns! There were twenty young fellows loafing about the street, but not one would stir, though I drew my revolver, and offered to lead the way. No! they said that the buggy could not be caught up now before it reached Menke's saloon, and that a bloodthirsty crowd would be there, and so on, and so on. Not a man would risk his precious skin for the sake of friendless foreigners, and one of them the most beautiful girl I ever saw. I was at my wits' end. Then I remembered that Menke's was only a few miles from Stockton, and knowing I should find some men here, I saddled my pony, and galloped all the way. And now, Mr. Blundell, how long will it take you to be off—yes—you and Harry!"

She paused, her bright eyes fixed trustingly upon his face, and her hand still upon his arm. But he shook his head and could not meet her look. Then he groaned, and swore softly to himself. At last, he said in a husky voice:

"God help us all, Miss Nep, I kin do nothing—nothing! There's not a dozen men in this place fit to go. Horne's boys were here yesterday, but they started at sun-up for Cimmaron. Some more may come in during the day; but who knows? And meanwhile——"

"But is there no one—no one? Oh! Harry, what are you doing, you are not going alone?"

I have said that I listened to Nep's story in silence. It was true, for my throat was too parched, and my lips too rigid for any words. Nep gave no names, but she knew who the helpless foreigners were, and what they were to me, and I knew—we all knew—what manner of hands they had fallen into. Pete Worrall and Kit Blossie! Oh, merciful Heavens! Laura in

their hands. A vision of a wicked, smiling face flashed before me—the face of the devil Kit Blossie, the man I had knocked down. A devilish face! A face full of the wickedness in which the man rejoiced. I could not speak to any one. I could only remember that I knew the way to Menke's saloon; yes, yes, I knew the way; and Comanche was still fresh. I was half way to the door when Nep spoke to me. I turned at her words, for I wished to thank her, and said, with difficulty:

"God bless you for this. Yes, I am going. Good-bye."

I turned again to the door, but before I could reach it Jake Blundell had stepped quickly forward and gripped me by the shoulder.

"What are you after?" he said shortly.

"Are you gone quite cracked?"

I shook myself free without replying, and laid my hand upon my revolver. He would have spoken again, but Mr. Gillespie said quietly behind:

"Let him alone, Jake. He is mad, but we can't stop him. The girl Pete and Kit have taken was to have been his wife. Poor lad! If we had only a round dozen decent shots, I'd chance it with you myself."

So they let me go in peace. I went quickly to Comanche, and began tightening his girths. As I secured the last, I heard a sharp exclamation from Jake Blundell, who was standing at the top of the saloon steps.

"Good Lord, Josiah! d'you see that cuss crossing the creek, and riding into town? Why, if it ain't the black archfiend himself—the biggest devil of the lot—Mike Alison, on his buckskin."

I started at the words, and looked in the direction Jake was pointing. Loping towards us at an easy pace, was a man on what they call a buckskin horse—that is a horse, bright yellow, with a black mane. Jake was right. Sitting his horse, Leone, like a pillar of stone, but keenly watching every movement of the men upon the steps, Mike Alison rode up. He nodded and smiled to me; gravely returned a grim salute from the Sheriff; and raised his hat when he saw Nep. I looked at him in silence, wondering whether he knew what had happened, and as he noted the expression of my face, his smile vanished, and drawing rein beside me, he said abruptly:

"What's happened?"

The others had now joined us. But

Mike did not take the slightest notice of them. I cleared my throat to speak distinctly, though the huskiness would not go. "You've saved my life twice, and I have called you my friend. Do you know what Pete Worral and Kit Blossie are about to-day?"

"I do not. I have been South a few days, and was to meet them at Menke's to-night." A great weight left my heart. That man was speaking the truth.

I laid my hand upon his knee.

"Mike, help me again. You are the only man who can help me."

"Out with it, lad."

"I told you—have you forgotten?—that I was to be married. My girl, I told you, was coming out from England. Laura, her name is—Laura." The others must have thought me mad to hear me talking to Mike Alison, of all men in the world, of my love affairs. "I rode in to-day to meet her on the road. But the coach has broken down, and, Mike—Mike—she and her uncle were persuaded by Kit Blossie and Pete Worral to get into their buggy. They are now at Menke's saloon. And there is not a man in the town to go except myself!"

"That'll do," he replied. The words came from between his teeth like the hiss of a rattlesnake.

"Sheriff!" He wheeled his horse round so suddenly that he brought it upon its haunches. "There is only one way of getting this business done. I must make Menke's at once. But I can't run the whole business alone. The other boys will turn on me this time; they're bound to. Can you bring up a posse to see the end of it?"

Jake Blundell's face, as he was asked this unexpected question, was a sight to see. But he answered heartily:

"You bet I will, Mike, if I can find any boys. But they're derved scarce!"

"That's not your fault. If you can, follow me with a crowd in an hour. If not—well—I must run the funeral alone. It won't be the first time."

He settled himself in the saddle. I had mounted while he was speaking to the Sheriff, and now did the same; but he turned upon me with a shake of the head.

"You must follow with the boys."

I shrugged my shoulders contemptuously. "Talk sense, please!"

He gave me a keen glance, then laying his hand upon my wrist, and pressing his finger upon the pulse, said sharply:

"Look at me."

I did so, and he continued slowly:

"Now, Harry, just listen! The business before us, to be any good, must be done coolly. We shall be two among twenty. If you lose your head we're done. Now, can you go into Menke's saloon with me, and shake hands with these men, without knowing what may have happened? Can you stand, and talk quietly, while your heartstrings are being torn to pieces by suspense? Can you sit down to a game of cards with the boys, when you long to see 'em all lying dead? Can you keep quiet, and unconcerned in manner, speech, and bearing, doing what I do, and saying what I say, until I give the word? If so, if your nerves are strong enough, then come; but not otherwise. I say nothing of the risk; I know you're not afraid. Remember, it is for her."

While he spoke Mike kept his eyes fixed upon mine with a searching, eager expression. I returned his look steadily.

"I understand all you say. I will go with you. I will be as cool as you yourself, Mike."

"Right! But—ah, there's another thing! Have you practised any with your six-shooter since I saw you last?"

"I can shoot a prairie dog at twenty yards."

"So? Can you kill it? Or does it slip back wounded into its hole?"

"No; I shoot it through the head, and pick up the body."

"Then you'll do. Vamos!"

CHAPTER IV.

MENKE'S.

At the moment when Nep Gillespie startled us all by her sudden appearance, Mr. Menke, a few miles away, was leaning lazily against the doorpost of his saloon, slowly whittling away a piece of deal with a long jack-knife.

He was a German of mild aspect, with a flat, expressionless face, light hair, and eyes of a dull, fishy blue. A flabby man, who gave one the impression, that lounging in the sun, and drinking a great deal of beer, were the principal occupations of his life. He seldom spoke, and then said little worth hearing; and strangers put him down as a stupid Dutchman, with as much intellectual ability as one of his own whisky barrels.

But a cunning brain was lodged in

Hermann Menke's thick head, above his lack-lustre eyes. Heaven only knows what the previous life of this man had been. Perhaps he had once been a simple German peasant in a quiet village, going to church on Sunday morning, and to dancing on Sunday evening. But no pen could describe the scenes he must have witnessed—the orgies, the gambling, drinking, fighting, murdering, and devilry—during the ten years he had kept his drinking-shop—a saloon frequented by all the lawless desperadoes of the country round—at Boar Cañon, on the western side of the Chicareeka Mountain.

He was a man without any friends, a solitary man with no wife, or children, who lived in this saloon and dispensed the drinks, and the cards, and dodged the shots when the revolvers came out. But he was not, himself, regarded as an outlaw; quite the contrary; he visited everybody; only six days, in fact, before the stage broke down, he was peeling his bit of board on the steps of Gillespie's store, discussing in his slow way with the master the news of the country, and the politics of the State. There were many reasons for the wide acquaintance enjoyed by Menke among the ranche folk of the neighbourhood. We will mention three. He had the largest command of ready money of any man about, and never refused any one a loan on good security. No crime had ever been brought directly home to him, though his place was known to be little better than a den of thieves; and he had a skin tougher than raw-hide for taunt, snub, or sarcasm; no man was able to boast that he had ever disturbed Menke's equanimity.

But his true resting-place, where he loved to dwell, was his old, weather-beaten saloon. Here, all the year round, came visitors of grim aspect, and uncertain occupation, who sometimes brought acquaintances from the East to drink and play. These Eastern folk, it was said, were seldom heard of again by their friends at home, and no man knew exactly what became of them. That, of course, had nothing to do with Menke. When questioned on the subject, he said that he supplied liquor, which he warranted to be genuine; and that he provided good beds. If his customers would fall out over their cards, and settle their quarrel with knife and pistol, it was regrettable, but not his business; and, as for the dead bodies after a fight, no one could say that he did not give good

burial to all, with a pile of stones on top to baulk the coyotes. There were the piles of stones, in fact, outside his saloon for all the world to see. That his saloon had a bad name, he did not deny; but it had been established ten years; nobody had ever brought any charge against him; and he was well acquainted with Jake Blundell, the County Sheriff. It was perfectly true that Mike Alison, Pete Worrall, and their friends were good customers of his; they came as they pleased; they paid for their drinks; as for their characters, they might be all that the world said; he asked no questions; he did not know their affairs, had nothing to do with him. That was all Hermann Menke had to say, and it had been quite enough for Frontier folk up to this twenty-first day of October, 1879, the day on which the stage broke down. For nearly half-an-hour Menke lounged at his open door, with his dog dozing at his feet, and such grasshoppers as the early frosts had spared chirping peacefully around him. Inside the saloon were twenty men, the majority sitting in various attitudes of listless vacancy, as if waiting for something to happen; a few languidly playing poker, for five cent points. After a while, a man strolled out and looked at the prospect.

"They're late to-day, Hermann," he observed in an impatient, irritable tone.

"Ah, that is so. Praps the game is heavy to carry this time. Eh! It is possible—very possible. No?"

"We-ll," remarked the other with a peculiarly round full-flavoured oath, aimed, apparently, at creation in general. "You ought to know, if any one. And, if it is so, why I hope it'll come quick. That cursed Mike is to be back to-night, and if there's anything spicy on when he turns up, he's dead sure to spoil the fun."

"Ya-yah!" said Menke, in sympathetic tones. "Mike is hard on you boys—I will say dat, very! Yet—he can shoot, lad! shoot like the black-Nick. His bullet always reaches the spot, the soft, tender spot, and none come near him, not at all—at all."

The speaker chuckled grimly.

His companion replied with another oath more emphatic than the first.

"Shoot! Yes. And so almighty free with it. He'll as soon plug a friend as foe—if not sooner. Look how he put a hole through Townshend—thick as they were the day before. And all for laying hold of a little ranche girl, who'd mistaken the saloon for an hotel, and was fair game.

But, there! It was a woman. And when you've said that, you've said everything as far as Mike is concerned. Let there be a girl in the case, and whew! I'd sooner face a mountain lion in a cage with a broken pocket-knife in my hand, than Mike Alison. I don't mind a man bein' a bit free with the shootin' iron when he's drunk. But that cuss never drinks. He never laughs; he scarcely ever swears. Ugh, he gives me the shivers! Hello! there's the buggy, at last. And, look! Blamed if that aint a petticoat. A gurl, by the Lord, a gurl! Hi, boys! Here's fun, come out of that, everyone, and look here!"

Trotting briskly down the long hill, at the bottom of which Menke's saloon nestled picturesquely among the rocks and cedar trees, was a carriage containing four people. Out turned all the men, forming an eager, expectant group round the door, and giving vent to a chorus of whispered exclamations, as they saw the flutter of a white dress in the back seat of the buggy.

The vehicle approached quickly, and the faces of its occupants were soon distinctly visible. The men now became silent, their eyes opened to their fullest width, and a deep, involuntary sigh of admiration and pleasure escaped them.

The Western cowboy of the lower class has the most limited acquaintance with women that it is possible to imagine. I have been told in all seriousness more than once by one, "that he had not spoken to a woman for five years," and I believe the statement was almost strictly true. Judge then of the feelings of these men, as they stared, for the first time in their lives, at the fair face of an English girl.

A fair face, with delicate, regular features; large blue eyes of the intent earnest kind; a complexion so pure and fresh that it was not necessary to hear her speak to guess her nationality. Above the white forehead were shining bands of golden hair, bound neatly back, though one or two had escaped from bondage to-day, and waved in the wind rebelliously.

Laura was dressed simply in white, with a blue ribbon at her throat, and a plain straw hat. She wore no ornaments, except the brooch which secured the ribbon, and therefore looked exactly what she was, a refined, sweet English lady.

The buggy stopped, and Kit Blossie, the driver, swung himself down, and opened the carriage door.

"But this is not Stockton!" said the other passenger, a stout gentleman with

white whiskers, dressed in shooting costume, and looking intensely British.

"You can go no further," answered Pete Worral, who was sitting opposite to him. "We must trouble you to get out for a while. Come. It aint no good foolin' round, old man, and gettin' hot. Out with ye. Boys, just lend a hand——"

But Pete did not finish his sentence. He was of a hasty disposition, and, instead of giving his passengers time to realise their position by degrees, laid hold of Mr. Temple roughly by the shoulder. He had much mistaken his man. White hair does not always mean want of muscle. Imagining the fellow to be drunk—for Pete had applied himself more than once to a brandy flask on the way—Mr. Temple grappled with him, and grasping his throat with both hands, pushed him backwards with such goodwill, that he lost his balance, and ignominiously turned a somersault over the splash-board of the buggy, landing him abruptly on his head.

This turning of the tables amused the crowd mightily, and when Pete rose from the ground with many oaths, and passed his hand round for his pistol, there was a hearty laugh, accompanied with a warning cry:

"Hold up, now! The old man was right. Keep your fingers away from there!"

And, head of the gang though he was, Pete was obliged to submit with a bad grace, and leave Kit Blossie to escort the passengers, with marked politeness, to a small room behind the main apartment of the saloon.

Mr. Temple had now recovered from the effect of the scrimmage, and though much puzzled at the whole proceeding, was somewhat reassured by the manner of the younger man. "A good-looking fellow at one time, I should think," he said afterwards. "But his beauty was interfered with by a broken nose, and a pair of eyes that had not long ago been very black—a kick from a horse, he told us."

When the old gentleman made a second attempt to discover the precise position of affairs, Kit Blossie smiled and looked at Laura.

"Western hospitality, sir. You see, it ain't often that the boys have the pleasure of seeing a lady in these parts, and we thought we'd give 'em a treat. Oh, we'll move on to Stockton presently."

He spoke slowly, and to the last word never removed his eyes from the girl's face.

Mr. Temple's heart ached. Oh, for a good horsewhip, and youth and strength and time wherewith to lay it on!

"But I have paid my niece's fare and my own for a direct journey to Stockton. Tell me, man, what do you mean?"

Kit Blossie sighed gently and shook his head, then softly chuckled as he glanced at the old gentleman's red, excited face.

"Well, you see, my friend," he said, slowly—and again his eyes returned to contemplation of Laura—"it's this way—"

"Yes," interrupted Mr. Temple, bitterly. "You need not go on. I see that we are in the hands of scoundrels. I suppose you are aware that I am not without friends here?"

"Here?" said Kit, raising his eyebrows. "That's curious! None of the boys seemed to recognise you."

"I mean in this country," roared the old gentleman, stamping his foot; "about Stockton and the neighbourhood!"

"Oh, yes—yes—Stockton," said Kit, reflectively. "Do you know how far we are off Stockton?"

Mr. Temple was silent. The country was utterly strange to him. They might be fifty miles away.

"At any rate, sir, I am an English citizen. If anything should happen to me or my niece, you would pay dearly for it—dearly for it."

The young man opened his eyes wide at this threat, and then threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"That's so good a joke that I must just clear off and tell the boys. A Britisher to be held sacred! Oh, Lord, how rich! Well, my noble Englishman, our boss, Mike Alison—who'll be here, I dessay, before you leave—came from the little island a few years ago. Put your case before him if you think by his face that he'll be scared by the British Government. Now I'm goin'. You'll be comfortable, I hope—and the young lady. We shall meet again before long, and see more of one another."

He went slowly out and closed the door, locking it after him with a distinct and deliberate click.

Mr. Temple hastily glanced round the room. There was a small window a foot square, with a stout iron bar across it, and another door, just ajar, which opened into the saloon itself. The sound of loud, coarse voices came from this side, and Mr. Temple's first action was to close the door smartly. Even then, there being only

a thin wooden partition between the rooms, the buzz of conversation was still faintly audible; and presently, when two men strolled up the room and seated themselves close by the partition, the prisoners could hear what they were saying, and recognised the tones of the men by whom they had been entrapped. For some little time, however, Mr. Temple and Laura were too much occupied with each other to pay attention to anything else.

When Kit finally took himself off, the old gentleman silently drew the girl towards him and kissed her. She looked at him wistfully, with a half-puzzled expression.

"Uncle Geoffrey, do tell me exactly what you think these men are going to do with us?"

He put his arms round her, clasped her close, and shook his head.

"My dear, my dear, how can I? Yet I must tell you—I must tell you, that—I—fear the worst!"

"And don't you think there is any chance of Harry? But no, there is none," she added hastily. "Don't speak."

She put her finger on his lip, and then hid her face in his breast for awhile. Presently, she raised her head, and resolutely brushed away the tears.

"It is very weak of me to give way like this. But it is so sudden, so unexpected, so terrible; and I cannot help thinking of our poor boy waiting for us, and wondering what can have happened. I was not thinking of myself, or of you, dear. Perhaps I had better do so, and then I shall not cry."

He laid his cheek upon hers.

"My brave girl." She felt the hot tears dropping one by one.

They did not speak again for some time. Now and then Laura shuddered slightly, and Mr. Temple's face grew so pale and wan, that his friends would have scarcely recognised him.

Meanwhile, the two voices in the saloon rose and fell, and, by-and-by, the prisoners began to listen to what was said.

The men seemed to be heated with drink, one was laughing, the other in bad humour.

"Curse the luck," they heard him say, it was Pete Worral. "I haven't been so much out of it for months. Your deal, Kit."

"Right, mio amigo, so—so! Right bower here; my trick again. Only twenty more points to make, and then the stakes are mine, my boy. Plucky old codger,

her uncle! Never saw you turn a neater skyer. Well, don't get mad. Remember —" and here he whispered something that Laura could not hear, but which Mr. Temple did: and he clenched his fists and groaned, longing, perhaps, for a revolver, which he would not have known how to use. He kept still, however, listening for more. Kit was laughing again.

"Nothing like cards, with a decent glass beside one, to decide important business. I don't want the money, blast it! You and the boys can have that, but—well, play, man, play, it's your turn. What's that? A king. There you are, then, mine again. Gosh! Time's drawing on. I must have a peep at her in a minute. But we'll settle this first. If my luck sticks to me, this round will be the last. Only five points to win."

He fell silent now, and as his harsh voice ceased, Laura raised her head once more. Mr. Temple's eyes were bent on the ground. He took something from his waistcoat-pocket, and held it concealed in his right hand. Then he stole a glance at his companion, and seeing that her eyes were bright and steady, and her head erect, lifted his eyes, and gazed steadfastly into her face. The colour fled from the girl's cheeks, as she met his look; but her eyes grew brighter and never swerved from his.

"Laura, do you—do you know what they mean?"

She made no reply.

Slowly, very slowly, he opened his right hand, watching her furtively the while. In the palm of this hand, lay a pocket-knife; the blade of it seemed to be no more than two inches long.

The girl looked at it a moment, then took it from him and opened the big blade.

"It will do," she whispered, handing it back. "You will drive it straight—straight to my heart—will you not?"

Mr. Temple nodded. He was past all speech. Laura fell upon her knees, and covered her face; but her uncle could not pray. He bent over the girl with set teeth, firmly grasping the open knife in his hand. He was old; he had lived a quiet life in law-abiding England; and now, in his age, he had come abroad—to kill the child!

Think of it! Think of it!

And while the girl waited, on her knees, and the old man watched for the time to deal the blow, in the saloon outside Hermann Menke stood at the bar and

passed the whisky bottle—it was nothing to him—and the two men played their game, and the others looked on. Five minutes more and the game would be finished. Well; it was nothing to Hermann Menke.

CHAPTER V.

THE GAME AND THE STAKES.

A RACE for life and death. We had ten miles of rough country to cover, and we did it in less than an hour.

The horses seemed to understand the urgency of the case—what does not an intelligent horse understand?—and neither rough nor smooth, up hill nor down hill, made any difference to their pace. A creek was reached with steep crumbling banks; a spot which, under ordinary circumstances, I should have ridden a mile out of my way to avoid. Now, I led the way, and Comanche was at the bottom with one leap, and up the opposite side with another, more like a young prong-horned antelope, than an elderly cow-pony. On, through dark cañons, and over rolling prairie; past a ranche, where the stockman paused in his work and laid his thumb on his revolver at sight of Black Mike; removing it, as we dashed by, and rubbing his nose reflectively, wondering what devilment the cuss had in view to-day, and whether the Sheriff was after him.

At last Mike raised his hand and pointed. Half-a-mile ahead a wreath of blue smoke was curling slowly up from a grey chimney, among a grove of trees.

"Menke's," he said laconically. "Not a sign now, Harry, nor a look, until I give the word."

I nodded, but my pulse beat no faster; my face did not change in expression. They told me afterwards that it was as colourless as a dead man's. I believe that at this moment the despair which possessed me had affected my mind. Happily, the conduct of the business which followed was in the hands of one whose nerves were at their steadiest, whose brain was at its clearest, in a crisis such as this.

Mike Alison was in his element. Not a shade of anxiety was visible in his face, as we drew up before the main door of the saloon, where Menke had been lounging previous to the arrival of the buggy, and Mike greeted two men on the steps in the cheeriest tone I had ever heard him use.

"Well, boys, and how's things? Worrall and Blossie here?"

"Yes, boss. Inside, playing."

"So! And what are they playing for?"

The men grinned, and jerked their thumbs in the direction of the small room behind the saloon.

"Big stakes."

Mike laughed.

"Ha, ha! Cunning dogs! I heard there was something in the wind. I'm earlier than I intended; come in for the fun after all. Never mind, let 'em play; let 'em play—it'll do them good. No, thanks, we won't look at the stakes yet. Plenty of time for that; and Worrall might not like it. He's boss here. We'll drop in to see him and his partner first. By-the-by, you remember this man!" pointing to me. "I picked him up on the way here and asked him to come along for a bit of a game. Get down, Harry. Now, boys, let's have a drink all round. I'm as dry as a mosquito in June."

Thus, speaking in a tone loud enough for all the world to hear, Mike dismounted leisurely, stepped across the porch, and carelessly tilting his sombrero back with his right hand, quietly entered Menke's saloon.

He was greeted with a silence that could be felt. It was the shadow of the hawk over the chicken-yard.

"Come, stand to, stand to, those who'll have anything," said Mike in a cheery tone, his eyes slipping rapidly from face to face, until he caught sight of two men in the further corner of the room.

"Mr. Menke"—shaking hands with the saloon-keeper—"how are you? Business is brisk to-day. So, I hear you've Eastern visitors again. Well, gentlemen, and what'll you have? All right; five cocktails, two sherry cobbler, three lagers, and one egg-nog. Serve 'em out, Mr. Menke, and put it down to me. Thanks; and now, Joe, tell me what you've all been up to?"

Mike was now stirring a glass of brandy, and smiling amiably, his back against the counter and his legs comfortably crossed. The ominous silence and looks askance, which had heralded his first appearance, now subsided. The players went on with their games, the drinkers sipped their whisky, and only two men near the wooden partition at the further end of the room still kept their eyes on the new comers. These were Worrall and Blossie. They did not come forward to greet us.

"And so," said Mike, after hearing Joe's

account of the arrival, and critically examining the contents of his glass—a sip between each word—"this raid is entirely the funeral of Pete and Kit!"

"Yes; but we're to have a share of what's on the old man."

"Of course," chimed in Mike, gravely.

"Well, Harry, I guess, if you've had enough whisky, we'll move up a little, and hunt for a vacant table and two partners. I feel rather like beginning that game I promised you. The bill, Menke."

As Mike spoke he stretched himself and yawned. Then he paid his money leisurely, pocketed the change, and with slow and careless step made his way towards the upper end of the saloon.

I followed closely. We were in a large oblong room, the door at which we entered opening at one end close to the bar. There was a stove here, lighted even in this warm weather, and six men sitting round it smoking, with their feet on the top, and their chairs tilted back as far as they might safely go. Beyond the stove, which we now left behind us, and stretching to the wooden partition near which Worrall and Blossie had seated themselves, were two lines of small tables for cards, each accommodating four players.

We went about half-way up the room, and then Mike stopped to lay his hand with a short greeting on the shoulder of a card player. At the touch and sound the man rose quickly and motioned towards the table.

"Will you come in, Mike? Me and Bill are only fooling for a few cents."

"No, Josh. You're in the middle of a round. There's no hurry. We'll watch you a bit. Plenty of time for our game. Eh, Harry?"

He turned to me with a smile; but at the same moment trod sharply on my toe.

I had now to put the greatest pressure upon myself to preserve an easy bearing, and not excite attention from those around. The allusion to Laura by the men, the knowledge that we were close by her, had completely broken down the benumbed, hopeless despair. It was well that ordinary Western life gives a man a hard, grim face; it was well that Mike had warned me of the danger before I started. Had it not been for this, I must have aroused the deepest suspicion.

At last I could bear the suspense no longer, and, softly pressing Mike's foot, said as carelessly as I could, though the hollowness of my voice startled me:

"When is the fun to begin? I came here expecting a game. It's a long time coming."

Mike turned quickly with a significant nod.

"All right, lad, in a minute. You're too impatient. Thanks, Bill; well, I guess we'll come. Mr. Menke, a new deck of cards here."

We were standing close together. Mike now leant towards me, and slapping his pocket as if his words had reference to money, whispered:

"I've had to keep quiet so long to get 'em off the scent. They suspected our game when we first turned up. Now the course is clear. There's only one thing to say: keep yourself still, and don't look at Kit until I say 'Short Cut.' Then pull as quick as you please, back up against me, and cover the boys at the bar. The moment a six-shooter comes out begin to fire, and keep on till I tell you to stop. Quiet, now; here's Kit with the news. Steady, boy!"

With a step not quite so sure as it had been an hour ago, Kit Blossie came towards us, between the rows of card tables, and holding out his hand with a grin, shook both Mike's and my own, warmly.

"Very glad to see ye, by George!" he said hoarsely. "We were finishing a game, Pete and me, so I didn't come round before. Are you going to play? Well, you must excuse me." Here he smiled so broadly that he showed every tooth in his head.

"And what are you going to do, Kit?" said Mike, shuffling the cards Menke had handed to him, with an absent air.

"Do—Eh? Do? Oh, I've been playing Pete here, for high stakes, that's all, and I've beat him. And now I'm going to count the winnings."

Again, he held out his hand, with a drunken chuckle, but somehow I contrived not to see it, so with a grunt he went slowly back again, towards the door in the wooden partition.

As he left us Mike deposited his cards quickly on the table, and glanced keenly after the retreating figure. Kit had stopped half-way, and was now leaning over the back of a chair talking to someone.

"Is this a full pack, Hermann?"

There was a general laugh. As if anyone would think of giving Mike Alison a short one.

"Well, I must count it and see. Come, gather up your stakes, boys, and don't stare at us; we're ready."

The man called Bill now moved to my side; and with a quick, decided motion, Mike began to count.

"Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two," again I felt a pressure on my foot, and saw him put down two cards together; "twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five." Kit had now concluded his conversation, and resumed his progress towards the door. The cards were passing swiftly through Mike's hands, but he was not looking at them. "Forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight." Kit was close to the partition. Pete Worral, half risen from his chair, was peering intently after him.

"Short Cut."

It was the word at last.

With a swift movement, Mike stepped forward, facing the wooden partition, holding in each hand a cocked revolver. Crack, the double report rang out in the low-roofed saloon, with a smothered roar. Through the stifling smoke, I dimly saw the tall figure near the door sway to and fro like a tower undermined with gunpowder, totter, and fall forwards with the heavy unmistakable thud of a dead man. At the same moment came a crash of breaking wood. The man at the table close by had sprung up with a sharp, convulsive cry, and, stumbling backwards over his chair, smashed it to fragments.

As Mike gave the word, I drew my revolver, and standing against him, back to back, passed the muzzle slowly round the faces in front of me. At the same time, clearly audible above the yell of the startled crowd, came his warning.

"Steady! steady! The first who puts his finger on his pistol will go to Kingdom Come before he can wink. Steady, I say, steady!"

For a few seconds no one moved. There were only five men in front of me at this time, and these the least concerned in the matter. The rest, furious though they were, and bound by the only code of honour they possessed to avenge this outrage at all costs, stood quelled by the man who feared nothing; who never missed his aim; and who, for five years past, had never failed for good or ill to keep his word.

But this could not last. In a few minutes we must have been fighting for our lives, the odds against us—ten to one. At this moment, however, there was a loud shout from Menke, who was watching the scene from behind a whisky barrel. The door near the bar flew open, and Jake

Blundell, followed by thirty cowboys with their rifles at the ready, and every finger on the trigger, came hastily in.

Mike turned his head at the welcome sound, and as the desperadoes became as quiet as mice and raised their hands in token of submission, he exclaimed promptly:

"Hold up, Jake."

Which just came in time to save the lives of Menke and the men I was covering.

In trooped the new comers, and Mike Alison and the Sheriff shook hands, for the first time in their lives. Nep Gillespie was with the rescue party, and now came up to me, pale and anxious.

"Where are they?"

I pointed to the partition.

"I am just going to see."

"You wait," she said quickly, holding my arm. Then, raising her voice, addressed the Sheriff, "Mr. Blundell, will you please take care that no one leaves this place until I have been into the room behind, alone? The passengers from the stage are there."

Jake nodded, and looked down upon her approvingly.

"Boys," he roared, "up with the rifles again, and, if there's a movement anywhere, let go."

"If the girl's been so much as spoken rough," he continued, glaring upon the gang, "not one living soul who saw them taken in shall leave this place alive—not one living soul. Steady with yer repeaters, boys. We're ready, Miss Nep. You go forward now. If the news is bad, say 'Yee.' If all's safe, 'No.' Then we shall know what to do. Keep still, Thornton, it'll be all over in a minute."

Then, amid a silence so profound that the champing of the horses outside could be plainly heard, Nep opened the door, gave a little cry, and passed quickly in. Paying no attention to Jake, I followed her, and, standing over Kit Blossie's dead body, waited breathlessly. Now the door-handle was turned again, and Nep reappeared; she stepped aside for me to pass in, and then said quietly, "NO."

CHAPTER VI

A GENTLEMAN BORN.

Two days afterwards. We were at Eagle Tail Rancho. It was ten o'clock. The girls had gone to bed. Mr. Temple sat in the easy-chair, and Jack, the Sheriff, myself, and Kirk Troy, whose long legs lay across

half one side of the room, completed the circle.

Suddenly, and without any warning, the Sheriff arose solemnly and delivered his soul of the following oration.

"Friends," he began slowly, "I'm goin' to say a thing for which there maybe folk—" and here he looked at me—"who'll cry, 'blame him fur an interferin', backbitin', spiteful meddler.' Wa'al, now, I've reckoned to chance this. For, sez I, where's the good of bein' Sheriff of this county, if I don't do my duty all round? Private as well as public."

"Now, what I've on my mind is this: a man here got acquainted in a peecoliar kind o' way with Mike Alison. This Mike Alison, whom we all know—and we needn't go out of our way to call him names—quite contrary to his own nature, does more'n one real handsome thing by this man, and he, bein' impetuous inclined, and not seein' or knowin' the other side of the cuss, sez, 'Be my friend.' 'I will,' sez Mike. And, boys, I aint the one to say as he didn't mean it honest and square—when he said it. But a bit later a young lady comes out—the purtiest morsel, I'm willing to swear, as was ever seen on this airth, or any other. Under circumstances we all know about, Mike Alison sees this young lady, and from the moment he sets eyes on her—" here the Sheriff raised his voice, and emphasised each word—"he never ceases lookin' at her ontill she's out o' sight. Well, you say, why shouldn't he look at such a girl? Many an honest man would stare his eyes out and no blame to him. Ay, that's so; but he wouldn't look as Mike Alison looked. No, nor he wouldn't bow as he bowed, nor he wouldn't say 'I won't forget' as he said it, unless—he meant mischief. Boys, Harry Thornton has asked Mike Alison to visit here, and I kin see by his face that nothing I can say will persuade him to countermand the invite. But dew you just remember that I am speaking with twenty years' experience of such as him and I say—beware of him! Keep your eyes well greased when he's around. Don't let her out of your sight one moment, as you value your souls. I tell you, boys, so help me Heaven! if that man comes prowlin' around here with a free hand, there will be trouble."

Jake sat down and wiped his brow. The close proximity in which he had stood to the fire, and his own excitement, made him perspire as if it were the middle of summer. No one spoke for a minute. I

was too angry to trust myself, and the others too much astonished. At last Jack said, in his driest tone :

"So you have invited Mike Alison to the ranche, Harry? You might have waited until you had a place of your own."

"I shall be happy to receive him in the stable, if you please," I replied hotly, "if you won't have him here. Laura and I will do our best to make him comfortable."

My partner shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course he's free to come, as you've asked him, and we must hope for the best. I shall be glad, though, for your own sake, when you become a little wiser."

"Thanks. I hope it will be some time before it becomes my practice to turn a cold shoulder upon a man who has done more for me, out of pure disinterestedness, than anyone I have ever met. Don't forget, Jack, that he saved my life twice : once from the Indians, and once from the horse thieves. And now he has saved Laura."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Temple, "we must not forget that."

"I don't want you to forget it, Harry. You are under the greatest obligations to this man, and if you ever get a chance you must repay him. But as for asking him to this ranche—" Jack shrugged his shoulders ; "by-the-by," he went on, "you told me once how he started at Laura's name. When was that?"

"The night the Indians burnt my camp."

"Yes. How much disinterested kindness had he shown before that?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"It depends!" was the dry reply.

I was silent. There was a nasty flavour in Jack's words. We had never got at the bottom of that start. Then I thought of those true grey eyes, and I turned abruptly to the Sheriff.

"I don't want to impute any bad motives to you, Jake Blundell, but I must say this : I think your suspicions are utterly unfounded. I do not care one straw about Mike Alison's history ; no doubt he has done things. But I believe in him. I believe he means well and honestly by us. I shall not either by word or look treat him otherwise than as a most true friend. But I will do this : I will repeat to Miss Temple what you have said, and so put her on her guard. If she believes your statements, I will act accordingly. At the same time I must beg you to distinctly

understand that I will not allow a word to be spoken against Mike Alison in my presence. Whatever he may have done to others, he has been a true friend to me."

I rose now quickly, and went into the next room to lay down sheepskins and blankets. Through the open door I could see that Kirk Troy had risen from his seat, and was peering at the Sheriff with a look of intent interest, and I heard Jake's muttered comment on my words.

"Foolish boy, foolish boy! I knew he'd take it in this way. S'elp me, gentlemen, I've no spite agin that man ; but I know what I'm sayin', and I say again, and yet again, there—will—be—trouble. We have not heard the last of Mike Alison."

We had not, indeed ; yet the last of him was very, very far from what Jake Blundell expected, as you shall see.

CHAPTER VII.

AT EAGLE TAIL RANCHE.

THE next morning Jake Blundell returned to town. He said nothing more to me about Mike ; but I overheard a remark to Jack when he was taking leave.

"Yes, you may be sure I'll keep my eyes and ears open, and watch him and his gang keeful enough. There's others on the job, also, nearer head-quarters than me."

Later in the day I saddled Comanche, and brought out a little bay mare, Jack's wedding present to Laura, which for some time past I had ridden daily myself with a blanket round my knees, and was now able to pronounce perfectly safe. We were starting on our first expedition to the new ranche.

On the way I told Laura of what had passed on the preceding evening. Never, before or since, have I seen her quite so angry.

"How abominable to say such things! Mr. Alison look at me in an impertinent manner! Nothing of the kind. He was most polite. I don't care what he has done. I would trust myself with that man, Harry, alone, as readily as I would with Uncle Geoffrey.

"And for Jack, too, to mistrust him! as well mistrust Nep— But oh! Harry, my dear"—and here Laura smiled all over her face in such a way that I found it necessary to institute another interruption—"are they engaged?"

"You mean Nep and Jack? Certainly not."

"But they are so much together; and I am certain he cares for her, and that she knows it."

"I daresay; but does he know that she knows it? Remember—well, I won't say it again—we are in America, Western America. Jack and I have only known Nep for the past twelve months; previous to that she was at school in the East, spending her holidays at Stockton. So, they are friends. At the same time there's not a bachelor for twenty miles round who does not rave about her, and Jack has a dozen ardent rivals, if he has one. I hope you are right, I am sure, for she is really an exceedingly well educated girl, and a true lady at heart, though she does carry a revolver, and can ride a bucking horse."

"Yes, I am sure she is. And yet, I can't quite understand these American friendships. She rides with Jack, alone. Are her other friends granted similar privileges? And if they are not, why doesn't he say something? One reads of such things in books. I can't say I like it."

"Indeed?" I answered smiling. "I do, immensely. Nep and I have ridden together scores of times. Alas! those days are over now for me."

"Are they? It didn't look like it this morning when you were showing her your revolver, and cleaning hers."

And so we chatted gaily on, pursuing our journey leisurely. We were now within sight of El Gato Creek, and were just going to break into a lope, when we saw Mr. Gillespie approaching us on the road from town.

He was dressed as usual in neat black clothes; but he had now donned a pair of smart riding-boots, with remarkably high heels, and duly spurred; a full-size Colt's revolver was hanging from his waist, and he rode a wild-looking, raw-boned cowpony. Altogether he was the most curious compound of civilised storekeeper and stockman ever seen.

He saluted us with gravity, though his brown eyes twinkled merrily.

"Wa-al, Miss Laura, you don't look so much the worse for yesterday. Wonderful revivin' power in New Mexican air, Harry! How's the old gentleman? Rather used up? Ay, he looked it, last night. He'll soon pull round, though. You Britishers are tough. What he went through would have killed most of the Eastern men I know."

"So, friends, I won't keep you. I see

you are worried with business. I am just tottin' down to have a look at my little girl, and to tell Jack that I've had an offer for the wool he left with me, which might suit him. By-the-by, I've some bad news for you. The American parson's got sick and has gone home for a spell. I doubt whether he'll taste Jack's champagne until the New Year."

Here was a terrible state of things.

"Why, what has happened to him?"

Mr. Gillespie gave his mouth a comical twist.

"Ah! that's hard telling—very! The official bulletin says 'severe indisposition and rheumatic affections in the limbs.' I should be inclined to have said, hankerings after thanksgiving-day, pumpkin-pies and whisky fixin's! It's a fact, however, that he's gone, and that there's no one to run your funeral—I beg pardon, marriage—until he comes back. P'raps he'll turn up before Christmas, if not, you'd better fetch him. Adios."

We rode on slowly in silence. Had I been alone, I should have used strong language concerning that parson. There was no help for it, though; and Laura reminded me that the preparations which had yet to be made were so many that two months would very soon pass, and our home be all the more complete and comfortable at the end of it. The worst point was the probable state of the weather. I solemnly swore, however, there and then, that if this parson should make any excuse by reason of the cold, I would follow Mr. Gillespie's advice and fetch him, if I had to carry a lasso along and tie him down.

Two months we had to wait before that parson would come back to his Western ministrations—two months. To Laura the time was spent in learning the manners and customs of her new home, in arranging the furniture at our ranche, in riding the pony I had broken in for her, and in going about the country with Nep, Jack, and myself.

Only one incident happened during this time.

This was the promised visit of Mike Alison.

It is curious what a fatality there is about some things in this world. The very first day that business called Jack and myself to town together, and the ranche was left in the charge of Kirk, Sarah Brunt, and the girls, when for three weeks previously we had never left them unpro-

tected for a single hour, Mike must needs take it into his head to pay that visit.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that he came. Nep was lying back on the couch, reading a novel; Laura was amusing herself turning over some music, old and new, trying this and that on the piano; Sarah Brunt was busy about household work in the kitchen; and Kirk Troy was in the stable mending harness. He was the first to hear the sound of approaching hoofs, and, looking out, saw the well-known buckskin horse on the road from town, pacing steadily towards the ranche. Throwing down his work, he tore to the house. His half-crazed brain was nearly turned with terror; he had sucked in every word spoken by Jake Blundell. More than that, he remembered it all, and he believed that the most frightful things were about to happen right away. And yet, though long before Mike reached the place, Kirk had taken a loaded rifle from the rack, and drawn the dog-head back to the full, it was characteristic of his weakened brain that he never warned the girls of their danger, nor went out boldly to meet the supposed villain. Instead of this, he skulked behind the door between bedroom and kitchen, and, in answer to Mike's whistle, Sarah Brunt made her appearance alone.

At sight of Black Mike, even the stout heart of the spinster beat more quickly than usual, though she braced herself to meet the difficulty in a becoming spirit.

"Good day, ma'am!" said the newcomer, in mild accents. "Anyone at home?"

"Not a creetur, except me and Kirk Troy," was the prompt answer.

"Is that so?" and Mike smiled broadly, for at this moment, Laura struck up a spirited march, which could have been heard a mile. Sarah Brunt put her arms akimbo, and tossed her head.

"Oh, of course the girls is in; but I didn't count them, as I knew they'd nothing to do with you. Come round at sundown again, if you're passin'. Jack and Harry will be at home, then."

"Thanks," was the tranquil answer. "I've ridden twenty miles, and I don't feel like doing any more. I'll get down. Miss Temple and I have met before. Tell them I'm here, if you don't mind."

Miss Brunt drew herself up, at the same time glancing sideways at Kirk Troy, who stood at the inner door, with his cocked rifle.

"No, Mike Alison, for that's who you are, and I know you well. I will not tell them young girls that you're come. And I kin tell *yew* straight, I think you've got blasted impudence even to ask me. That I *dew*!"

Mike made no reply to this delicate hint. He was dismounting at the moment, and now turned his back upon the house-keeper, and led his horse to the hitching post at the corner of the house. Securing Leone there, Mike strolled back in a leisurely manner. Miss Brunt was still in the doorway, watching him with a defiant but anxious eye.

"And what do you want now?" she said shortly, as he came up.

"I wish to know," he said, "whether you are going to tell Miss Temple that I'm here; or whether I must announce myself?"

"Neither the one nor the other," was the emphatic rejoinder. "Kirk, cover him; and let fly if he makes the slightest move forward. Now, Mike Alison, no fooling. Just git!"

At these words Mike's face, which up to this moment had been wearing a quiet, amused smile, changed. This was somewhat more than a joke. His brows contracted and his teeth slowly closed upon his moustache, and though for several seconds he stood perfectly still, the intrepid spinster, to use her own expression, "felt shivers run up and down her back like water snakes."

"I am sorry to be unpolite to a lady," said he at last, stepping forward, and putting Miss Brunt aside with as much ease and gentleness as if she had been a baby, "but this kind of thing gets monotonous, after a while."

He came now face to face with Kirk. The idiot's rifle was at the shoulder, and for a fractional part of a second, Mike's fingers went in search of his revolver, and Kirk's life hung by a hair. But better feelings gained the day, and he only said sternly:

"Put that down. Don't try to frighten me. You know perfectly well that you could not hit me if you fired. Your hand is trembling."

The men looked at each other fixedly. Kirk had brought himself fully to the pitch of shooting anybody or anything, if they had to push past him and open the parlour door; but this man did not push. He simply glared at him with terrible shining eyes, and, under his look, Kirk felt himself losing all heart and power.

"Put that down," said Mike again slowly approaching the idiot, step by step. Kirk sighed twice, wavered, cast an imploring look at Sarah Brunt, as if wishing she would take his place, and then slowly lowered the muzzle of his weapon, and stood still and helpless, to Sarah's intense disgust, while Mike walked steadily past him, and laid his hand on the lock of the parlour door.

An hour later Jack and I arrived from town. We were surprised to see Sarah running out to meet us, and spurred forward sharply.

"What's the matter?"

"The Devil," was the breathless reply. "He's here. Nothing short. It is Mike Alison himself. He has been alone in the settin'-room for I dunno know how long with Nep and Laura, and there's that blamed idiot cuss as foolish as he's high, a-squattin' on the door-step with a shot gun, and a sayin' he'll have Mike's blood when he comes out, yet without spunk enough to go in and take it there and then like a man and a Christian. And here am I, a worritin' myself to death, for fear that gun should go off in his great clumsy hands and hit the wrong person; and because I can't tell what's happenin' inside, and yet duran't peep in and see. For goodness sake, hurry up, boys, or they'll be all murdered before ye get there."

We did as we were told promptly, and Jack's face was as white as the redness of his complexion would permit, by the time we swung off our horses and made for the parlour. There was Kirk, as Sarah had described, crouching on the step, hugging a shot-gun, with long and anxious countenance, an unpleasant glitter in his eyes. We walked past him quickly and opened the door. What Jack expected to see I know not; but I never saw a man look more foolish than he, as with a cocked revolver in his hand he stepped in, and saw the girls at the piano in the act of beginning a duet. Beside them, and placing the music-book in position, was Mike Alison.

"I have not heard this piece for ten years," he was saying, "and it was thought old-fashioned then, I remember; but I used to consider it one of the prettiest ever written. Such duets as this do not seem to be composed nowadays."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT DO YOU HERE?

THE Western man has many qualities peculiar to himself, but none so character-

istic as a power of keeping his countenance, and retaining self-possession, under the most trying circumstances. Thus, when Jack opened the parlour door with blood-thirsty intent, and found there a polite and sociable party engaged in the innocent occupation already mentioned; though he inwardly felt, as he confided to Nep afterwards, "as mean as a squashed snail;" yet, after one whispered exclamation, and a nonplussed glance, he dropped his revolver into its holster, as if it were out by the merest accident, and greeted the visitor in the pleasantest manner imaginable, as if his presence was no surprise at all.

"And how have you been amusing yourself this afternoon, Mike? I hope they made you welcome."

"We did our best," said Laura innocently, while Sarah put down the dish she was carrying with a prodigious bang, and hastily left the room.

"Mr. Alison has been refreshing his memory of home by looking at photographs of English people. I hope he did not find it very dull?"

There was a curious questioning tone in Laura's voice; and glancing at her I noticed that her eyes were bright and her cheeks a little flushed. Mike, also, turned his head away before he replied slowly with the same refined tone and accent I had heard once before.

"Yes, Miss Temple was kind enough to introduce me to all the members of her family in succession. It was very interesting. And it certainly did remind me of old times."

He spoke in carefully-measured tones, which brought back to me the evening at camp, when I had told him Laura's name. I stretched my hand over the back of her chair to a little table where the family album stood, and without speaking began to turn the pages carelessly, watching Mike out of the corner of my eyes. There was a photograph of myself when a boy, one of Laura's father and mother, and then a likeness of her elder sister, married to an old college tutor of mine. Laura now laid her hand upon the book and smiled:

"Mr. Alison was so anxious to know who this could be, that I formally accused him of knowing Adelaide. But he denied it. Did you not, Mr. Alison?"

He was looking at me fully, the lamp Sarah had just placed on the table shining brightly on his face. I noticed for the first time that in spite of bright keen eyes, and

a fierce mouth, the prevailing expression of his face was sadness, the sadness of a man in constant pain. But his voice was perfectly composed as he replied slowly:

"I do not think anyone could fail to be struck with such a face as that, if it were only from its likeness to your own, Miss Temple."

"Indeed! But Adelaide is ever so much handsomer than I am," said Laura, looking pleased, "though it is true that when this was taken she was about my age. And what think you of the photo opposite?"

"Your sister's husband?"

"Yes. A splendid face, is it not?"

"No doubt. I am not much of a judge."

He bent his head nearer to the book, as if to examine the photo closely, but following the direction of his eyes I saw that they were fixed upon the likeness of the girl. Then he turned the page and looked up at Laura, and again I saw that hungry, longing glance which had awakened Jake's distrust a few weeks ago. It was very strange.

Before supper was ready we had three additions to our party, for Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Temple, when returning from their daily excursion, had run across the Sheriff, and, while the album still lay open before me, I heard his deep voice in the kitchen greeting Sarah Brunt. A minute later he came in, giving a perceptible start when he saw Mike Alison, smiling at the same time with a peculiar grimace.

"Yes," he answered Jack's greeting. "I was uncertain about coming, thinking that p'raps I'd be in the way; but now that I find this friend is here, I'm glad I accepted the invite."

He gravely saluted Mike, and I saw the two men look at each other long and steadily.

When supper was over the company broke up into pairs, Mike Alison and Mr. Gillespie lighting cigars and strolling off to the stables; Jake Blundell and Mr. Temple mixing their toddy, and drawing up to the fire. The girls were in high spirits. It was evident that the favourable impression they had formed of Mike Alison a few weeks ago had been strengthened by their experience of the afternoon.

The next day we took our visitor to the new ranche. Jack was busy and could not come, though Nep went with us; but Kirk Troy saddled his horse, uninvited, and rode behind Laura with a clouded brow.

The unfortunate man was in a restless and excitable state. From the time when

I had taken his gun from him the day before, with a sharp reminder that he must not meditate murder of my friends, he had offered no open hostility to Mike. But it was evident that he neither loved nor trusted him. He would never leave Laura now, under any pretext whatever, if he could help it.

But there were others besides the idiot to whom the presence of Mike Alison gave the gravest uneasiness. Though neither Jake Blundell nor Jack now said a word against our visitor before me, they held more than one council of war over the matter when I was out of the way. Mr. Temple, of course, was already in their confidence, and, it must be confessed, sided strongly with them.

"And now there is another thing," said Jake, after going through the old stories of Mike's bloodthirstiness, and the men he had killed, and the companions he kept, and the terror which he inspired. "Apart from all these, I have just learned a fact which makes me more than commonly uneasy. All Mike's money—at least, I suppose it was all he had—lay in bank at Trinidad. He's taken it all out in a lump. What's he done that for, except that he is meditating some villainy? And what is that villainy? Tell me that! He's foolin' round, I say, with a bad purpose!"

Mr. Temple, remembering the "mauvais quart d'heure" in the saloon, groaned, "What could it be?"

Mr. Gillespie, however, who was present, went off unexpectedly on quite the opposite tack. He listened to all Jake's arguments to the very end without saying a word. Then he made quite a speech in reply:

"I can't say that I think you've proved your case at present. Everything you tell me, and lay such stress upon, might be explained just as well the other way. He's foolin' round for a bad purpose, you say—an infernal purpose. Well, he is foolin' round, there's no doubt of that; but why for a bad purpose? Why, he's always looking hard at Miss Laura? Well, so am I, and so are you, and so is everyone else who gets a chance, except Jack, who stares at Nep. Why not account for it naturally, and say straight out she's an almighty pretty girl? Then he has not shot anyone for a month past, and you say this points to the conclusion that he's bottling up for a good old tear round when his plans are matured. Why? It seems to me, now, much more natural to suppose that the

society here has a softening influence upon him, specially that of Harry, whom Mike cares for, I believe, as if he were his brother; and it is said that even Mike Alison's chief pleasure does not lie in plugging his friends. Yes, I'm well aware of what he has done in the way of shootin', Jake; I know all about it. I understand the peccoliarly of all that money he had at Trinidad being withdrawn in a lump the other day, without a reason being given. But, come to think of it, it is his own; and we don't all let the world know what our private business is, or will be. And so," concluded Mr. Gillespie, with the ghost of a twinkle in his brown eyes, "it just seems to me, boys, that about the sensiblest thing we can do is to mind our own affairs, and let Harry and Mike mind theirs."

There was another person at Eagle Tail Rancho who was made desperately uncomfortable by the suspicions of Jake Blundell. This was Nep Gillespie.

A week after Mike took up his abode with us, she was riding alone with Jack, and, for the first time in his presence, broached the question of Mike's past life.

"Yes," he had answered drily, "I have no doubt some peculiar things have happened to him. He is a very peculiar man—more peculiar than pleasant."

Nep looked at her companion with curiosity. "I think him very pleasant," she said.

"You don't know him as well as I do."

"Indeed! How many times have you met him, then, before he came here?"

"Three or four."

"So have I. I danced with him once."

"A great honour!"

"Well, I had a real good time. He was the best partner there."

Jack was silent a minute. Then he said in the tone of one who has made up his mind upon a difficult question.

"I know nothing about his dancing; but I do know what you do not apparently, that he's a great scoundrel."

"But why should we fear him?"

"Why? Can't you understand that a man without principle, such as he, is never safe? Suppose he wanted to possess something here very badly, what would prevent him taking it, if he got the chance? I thought that perhaps you might help us. Neither Harry nor Laura will hear a word against the cuss, and believe that he stays here simply because of his friendship with Hal—or some such bosh. Can you

enlighten them? They are nothing more than babies, after all, or they would know that one who's killed as many men as Mike Alison during the past five years for the pleasure of killing, can't help going on until he makes a false step some day, and kicks the bucket himself. But, Lord bless you! They go on treating him like an ordinary Christian; trusting him more every day; until I get so wild that I long to draw upon him myself, and end it, though I know how surely it would end me."

Jack paused here, having delivered himself of the longest speech that was ever known to fall from his lips. Nep made no answer for some time. She knew the nature of her companion well. A matter of great urgency alone could draw from him such a serious and earnest expression of opinion as the foregoing.

Yet her belief in Mike Alison, though shaken, was not by any means destroyed. It was stunned, not killed. After a few minutes' thought she gathered herself together again, and said gravely:

"But, Jack, there are one or two things that I cannot understand if Mike Alison be all you say: if he has done so very many wicked things, why is he allowed to live? Of course I know what a good shot he is, and all that; but I also know enough of men in our country to be quite sure that an unmitigated villain would not live long about here."

Jack nodded.

"Yes, that is so; but don't discount his shooting power, and, more than that, his watchfulness. Three times have cowboys, hankering after the reward offered for Mike's life, slipped into a saloon behind him and waited their chance, and every time he noticed this, and, as the man reached for his derringer, turned and shot him through the head; the folk about believing he must have done it for fun, until the dead man's pockets were searched and the guarantee form found. However, it is a fact that he is not to be classed with such out-and-out villains and ruffians as Blossie and Worrall. If he rides away with your horses one day, he may shoot your deadliest enemy the next. Indeed, it is an open secret that it pays Jake Blundell far better to wink at his raids and to reap the benefit of his fondness for revenge and blood, than to hunt him down. But it's playing with a wild beast who may at any moment take the wrong side."

"I see," said the girl, thoughtfully.

"But there is another thing. What is your notion of Mike's intentions in the present instance? Do you think that he has very bad ones in his mind, or that it is merely a kind of playing with fire to encourage him to feel at home here?"

"I think his intentions are bad," said Jack briefly. "Jake is obtaining private information from a very sure source, which if proved, as it must be soon, will show that he is deliberately working out a scheme of a very infernal nature. You see, Mike is not a common rascal at all. In his way he is a genius, therefore he will not make rough and clumsy plans. With all his recklessness, he has a huge amount of self-control. To show how serious the Sheriff believes the case to be, I may tell you in confidence that he is already in communication with the Governor about a quick supply of troops in case of need. But we won't go into this, and mind you don't say a word about the troops to a soul."

"Of course not," she replied gravely, and then they rode in silence for some time. But in Nep's active mind an idea now began to form, which became more distinct and substantial every minute. At last she said earnestly:

"I suppose I may not know exactly what you accuse Mike Alison of intending to do?"

"No," was the emphatic answer. "I make no definite accusation against the man at all—yet."

"Then you don't know why he is here; you only suspect the reason?"

"Exactly."

"I understand," said the girl very slowly; "I understand. I presume now," she went on in the hesitating tone of one who fears being accused of saying something very foolish, "that no one has asked him the question point-blank. Laugh at me, if you please; but I should like to know."

Jack bit his lip; but he did not laugh.

"No, certainly not. It would be more than any man's life was worth if Mike took offence."

Nep smiled.

"And dare you ask him that question, Nep?"

"I would, without hesitation, if I thought it would do any good. Oh, I am not afraid of him," she added, laughing gaily. "And here we are at home again. Come, let us race to the stable, I am sure my Netty is faster than your Antonio—vamos, amigo."

Jack sighed. He would have preferred to go very slowly, and unburden his soul of something which during the past six months had oppressed it strangely; but Nep's word was law, and he was never very ready of speech, so he missed his opportunity, and they galloped home.

Two weeks passed by. Mr. Gillespie returned to business, and Jake Blundell accompanied him. But Mike Alison showed no sign of leaving; on the contrary, making himself quite at home, and apparently throwing himself heart and soul into the arrangements of furniture and the fitting up of the new ranche. In this he gave most valuable assistance, having a pair of hands which seemed capable of constructing anything.

One morning Mike surprised me greatly by saying that he should be unable to put the finishing touches to the last of the bookshelves at which he was working until the following day, as he was going to escort Miss Gillespie to town. I wished him a pleasant ride, and wondered what Jack would think of this freak. He did not, however, seem at all disturbed when I informed him of the fact. It was evident that he expected it.

So the black mare, Netty, and the buckskin horse, Leone, with their respective owners, loped briskly away, side by side, when breakfast was over. It was past sundown when they returned. We looked at Nep curiously. She was still grave and thoughtful, but talked more freely than had been the case for the past few days. The mantle of her former silence, however, seemed to have fallen upon Mike Alison. The old expression of intense watchfulness, which had been far less noticeable lately than in former days, had now returned. He constantly glanced at Jack with a restless, questioning look, and the familiar curtness of speech and manner gradually superseded his newly-acquired refined and gentle tone.

The girl had made up her mind to put that question to Mike, of which she had spoken in a tentative manner to Jack. It required rare courage, however; and thinking over all the people I know, or ever have known, I can remember no one but Nep who would have done such a thing.

"Mr. Alison," she said at last, "I asked you to kindly ride with me to-day, because I thought it right to say something to you, which I—which I felt should be said, both for your own sake, and for that of very dear friends of mine."

She stopped a moment here to steady her nerves and shape her words in the best possible way. Her companion bowed and turning slightly toward her, replied gravely:

"Please speak out, Miss Gillespie."

"Thank you, I will."

Here the girl raised her flushed face and looked steadily at him.

"I am going to ask you a question which will seem very impertinent. What I want to know is this: Why have you, a man who, I am told, has never spent two consecutive weeks at one house for five years past, taken up your abode so quietly and resolutely at Eagle Tail Rancho?"

Nep stopped to get her breath—somehow she seemed to have very little about her at this moment—and watched the effect of her words anxiously. She expected Mike to frown, start, exclaim; to do anything, in fact, but what he did, which was to turn slowly away from her steadfast look, and shake his head, with a smile, half sad, half bitter.

"You are very angry?" she said quickly, as he did not speak.

"I am a bit sorry," was the quiet reply.

"I am a bit surprised, but not angry—at least, not with you."

"You will answer my question then?"

"That is another matter. Are you quite sure that you had a right to ask it?"

Nep blushed hotly. Then she remembered Jack's words, and recovered herself.

"I said that it would seem impertinent. I see you think it so. But please answer my question."

Mike stroked his horse's mane reflectively.

"So," he said slowly, talking to himself more than to her, "so the folk are on the jump about me, eh? And you want to know why a murderer, a man whose hands are dyed with blood—oh! I know—a man like me obtrudes his presence upon respectable rancho-folk? Truly, Miss Nep, it is a difficult nut to crack, a nut with a nasty taste; and, what's more, I fear that I must leave you and your friends to break your teeth over it just at present. But I will answer your question."

"I came here because Harry Thornton invited me; I stay because he wishes me to do so; and as long as this is so, I shall continue to stay if I see fit, because, for the first time for five years, I have an object in my life. That is all I can tell you. Is there any other question you would like to ask?"

"No, thank you."

And nothing more was said by either until they reached the town. Nep had cast her die, and lost. She was no wiser than when she left Eagle Tail Rancho.

A few days after this, when Mike, Laura, and myself were returning from the new rancho, having put the last completing touch, a horseman galloped up and saluted Mike. I had seen the man before; it was he who had told the tale of Laura's capture, and Pete Worral's discomfiture, before the bar of Menke's saloon. While they were talking, Jack strolled up on foot, for we were close to home, and I noticed that he looked upon the conversing horsemen with a particularly benevolent smile.

Presently Mike wheeled and rode up to us; he was grim and anxious, and said hurriedly:

"I am sorry, friends, but I must be at Cimarron to-night. I've urgent business there." He gripped my hand. "Good-bye, Harry. I'm glad I've seen all the house-fixings through before I went, I shall run down on the twenty-ninth, to be in plenty of time for the wedding. Good-bye, Miss Temple." And with a wave of his hat he dashed off at a speed with which the horse of the cowboy, who accompanied him, had considerable difficulty in keeping pace.

"Ay, ay," growled Jack, as he watched the swiftly retreating figures. "He's quite right, and so was Jake. We have not seen the last of him yet, confound him!"

CHAPTER IX.

A FISH OUT OF WATER.

THE eighteenth of December was the day fixed by the Reverend Jonathan Chapin for his arrival at Eagle Tail Rancho, a week before the wedding. It had not been thought that he would appear upon the scene of action so early, but he returned from the East sooner than we had expected.

The reverend gentleman was due at noon, but it was nearly sundown before Kirk Troy, who was chopping firewood, reported that "a cuss on a burro was makin' for the rancho spry-like," and we knew that our man was here.

Jack and myself at once adjourned to the porch. On the slope of prairie to the northward someone was approaching mounted on a donkey of patient aspect. It was a black donkey, of large, strong frame, much heavier in build, and longer

in limb than the English ass; yet its master's feet were within a few inches of the ground, and at times it was an open question whether they did not actually touch it.

The ranchemen about Cimarron indulged in many candid expressions of opinion concerning the Reverend Jonathan and his burro. Mr. Gillespie seriously asked him more than once whether a religious man of twelve stone ought to ride a donkey at all, if he did not make a practice of carrying it himself for a part of every journey.

A curious and striking spectacle did the reverend gentleman present as he came towards us. Upon his head was a narrow-brimmed "wash-basin" hat, tied closely round with a capacious red woollen scarf, to protect his ears from the cold. He wore a long dark ulster, so disposed as to cover nearly the whole of his donkey as well as himself, and from beneath this garment his feet appeared conspicuously, being held at right angles to his burro's sides, with gently-elevated toes.

When Mr. Chapin reached the house he solemnly introduced himself, and shook hands. Then he dismounted with as much dignity as if his donkey were a thoroughbred, and, giving the reins into my hands, remarked graciously:

"I should be much obliged, young man, if you would place this beast in your stable, and fodder him well. I have ridden him from Stockton this afternoon, and he is weary."

After which he promptly made his way past Jack up to the kitchen fire.

I looked after the man with an astonishment and disgust too great for words. Of all the cool things that any one can do on the frontier, none is so cool as to ask a stranger to attend to his horse. It is nearly as great an insult as it would be in the East to expect a white woman to clean his boots.

When I returned to the ranche I found the traveller basking before the parlour fire, and making himself very much at home. His long limbs were reposing at full length across the hearth, and he was smiling at some remark of Nep's with superb condescension.

The Reverend Jonathan Chapin was a thin man, with high cheek-bones, a very long nose, and rather small eyes, which he had a habit of half closing when making a remark of any length, and giving his listeners a strong impression that he was

repeating a lesson, well learnt by heart. This mannerism was rendered the more conspicuous by a slow and deliberate utterance, and a voice with a strong nasal twang. He was clean shaven, and had dark, straight hair, worn rather long, and parted in the middle. In dress, Mr. Chapin was strictly clerical, and it is not to be denied that his spotless white tie and long black coat gave the place a civilised and respectable appearance, and made the flannel shirts and buckskin garments worn by Jack and myself look extremely rough and uncouth.

Supper was now served, and after the meal, warmed with good coffee and mutton cutlets, Mr. Chapin became mildly talkative.

His remarks, like those of many other men, were principally about himself and his work. He gave us interesting reminiscences of efforts to plant knowledge of true religion in the darkened minds of Western men, which did not happen to have been very successful as a rule; but Mr. Chapin was very complacent about the size of his congregation.

"I pay frequent visits, you see," he said, "to my neighbours. It is this which answers so well.

"I thought I would try preaching in the saloon—yes, in the saloon itself—at the new town of Otero, at night. For this purpose I specially prepared a course of three sermons upon the besetting sins of settlers in the country. The first, dealing with want of respect for sacred things, and expressed in language as clear and strong as I could command; the second, touching upon the widespread use of bad language—a continuation practically of the one before; and the third, warning my misguided friends of the retribution inevitably in store, if they continued in their wicked uncharitableness towards the Red man."

"This was very brave of you," said Nep.

"Well," he replied with a modest sigh, "I was told—warned by your father, Miss Neptuna—that the risk was great; but I felt that my duty was too clear to be mistaken; so I went in one evening when I knew the place was full. Yet, after all"—here Mr. Chapin sighed again, and continued with sad, impressive dignity—"I fear that my words only touched the hearts of very few. I had high hopes at first, for as I gave out my text, with a few introductory remarks, the card-playing stopped, and even the whisky-drinkers put down their glasses. Before I had gone far, however, a very extraordinary thing happened.

The men left the place. They did not go all together, but disappeared one by one until, when the moment arrived to make an appeal to their better nature, there was only the bar-keeper left. Yes," Mr. Chapin went on in a slow and meditative tone, while a preternatural silence reigned in the room, "I do not remember ever being more surprised at anything in my life. I even stopped speaking, a thing which under no circumstances have I done before, and looked questioningly at the bar-keeper. He was a Christian man, and had been to the church more than once. 'James,' I said, 'what does this mean?' 'Sir,' he answered, 'you've been too much for 'em.' 'I don't understand,' I said, bewildered still. 'It's clearer than daylight,' he replied, 'the boys are taken slick aback'—I repeat his own words—'pulled off their feet. They've never been spoke at before. Why, they're sensitive as girls, if you only knew it. Can't stand them words of yours, any more'n a cat can boiling water. Didn't you tell 'em the Lord would reckon wi' their sins hot, when He cotched them—or words to that effect? Well—then, what can you expect? I tell you, parson, the boys didn't know the Lord had heerd of Otero yet! Why, the railway depôt's only been built six weeks!" I was shocked, as you may well think, but after a little further talk I went away, feeling that my friend was right. I have not been there again, but I shall go, and—and on the next occasion I shall be more gentle in my manner. It was a curious experience, was it not, sir?" turning to Mr. Temple, who only nodded in reply.

"Since then," continued Mr. Chapin, "I have confined myself to visiting the surrounding ranches: I find this answers well."

"What an untold blessing it must be to the ranche-folk!" said Jack pensively.

"Yes," replied Mr. Chapin, in a dry tone, "they dew seem to appreciate the visits. I make a rule of calling in the week, and spending an evening with them, if I don't see them at church on the previous Sunday, and you wouldn't believe, sir," addressing Mr. Temple with a quiet smile, "how reg'lar their attendance becomes after that."

"I can quite understand it—quite!" said the old gentleman testily, for his nerves were beginning to suffer from the continuance of Mr. Chapin's eloquence.

I think it was the day after the pastor arrived that Jack and Nep became en-

gaged. They went out for a ride together, and did not return until late. As I opened the door, Nep ran by me with peculiar swiftness, and then Jack's voice came out of the darkness, with a husky tremble in it I had never heard before.

"Harry, old boy, come here and shake hands. Congratulate me, lad. We're engaged."

There was a general jubilation that evening. Two of the precious bottles of champagne were drawn from the cellar—for Mr. Gillespie had returned with the young people—and healths were drunk and songs sung, until even Mr. Chapin brightened up, and volunteered to sing a ballad, which a friend of his had composed. It was a beautiful love song, supposed, I believe, to express the pangs of a broken-hearted and forsaken lover, and was applauded by us to the echo. But as the singer had forgotten most of the words, and was not at all sure of the tune, we did not ask for an encore.

In the very midst of this jollity the dogs barked and we heard a halloo. Jack promptly threw open the door, and went out, hospitality beaming all over his face. When he returned, he was very much sobered down.

"It is Mike Alison," he said quietly, resuming his seat by Nep. "See to him, will you, Harry?"

I sallied forth now and found my friend at the stable. He smiled when I told him the news.

"Well," he said, "I shall be intruding on a family party, and I will not come in to-night. Give my excuses. I have blankets here, and I had my supper at Stockton."

"What nonsense," I replied contemptuously. "Come in, man, at once."

Yet I could not help thinking of Jack's face when he told us who was here. Things turned out, however, very differently from what I expected. Even Jack acknowledged afterwards that the rest of the evening could not have been merrier than it was. Mike Alison seemed to have cast his skin. His grimness and taciturnity had disappeared. He set the girls down to the piano, and made them play everything they knew; and when they rose at last, he astonished us all by taking their place with a laughing apology, and after a few false starts singing an old English hunting song in a rich baritone, and playing his own accompaniment.

"Oh, if Jake Blundell were only here to see!" said Laura, as we frantically ap-

plauded the performance, and asked for more. "But, Harry," she now whispered, excitedly, as Mike began a plaintive love ditty, "I have heard that voice before, I know I have. Oh, where could it have been? It seems to bring back old days! Yet I cannot—I cannot remember when!" And though Laura thought over it all the evening, she never came nearer to a solution of the problem.

The only person who thoroughly disapproved of the appearance of Mike Alison was the Reverend Jonathan Chapin. Jack declared that he looked upon Mike as if he were actually Satan in person. A collision between them was inevitable, and came at last one evening at supper.

During the day the reverend gentleman had been greatly exercised in his mind, for Jack had gravely and emphatically told him that it was his duty to say something to Mike about his manifold sins; and Mr. Chapin, though perfectly ready for the work, was in great doubt as to what kind of holy water would have most effect upon this friend. At last he decided upon the brand, and as we sat down to our evening meal, he began his attack.

"There is one custom, sir, which I find very rife among certain classes in this country, and upon which I should like a candid opinion from you. I allude to the frequent shooting of human beings that goes on in these saloons and gambling-dens. I suppose there is no means of stopping this horrible practice?"

"There's one which might be tried," was the curt answer. "Fine the saloon-keeper five dollars every time he sold adulterated whisky."

"And what would be the effect of this restriction?"

"To keep men's brains cool, and prevent them from going mad after a single cock-tail. Do you know what firewater is like, sir?"

"No, I do not," said Mr. Chapin, with marked emphasis. "I do not. But I fear that it is the men whose brains are clearest, who do most of the shooting."

Mike Alison bent his eyes on his questioner with a look of great curiosity.

"You're right," he replied coolly. "But those men generally have a good reason for shooting—I speak from personal experience."

Mr. Chapin bowed.

"Yes, yes, I see. You defend this practice by intimating that those who are killed deserve their fate. This is a terrible

doctrine, my friend; a fearful thing to say. However, I will waive this question for the moment. But there is another. Sir!"—and here Mr. Chapin laid down knife and fork and accentuated each word by striking the palm of his left hand with his right forefinger—"there is one thing which cannot be defended, even by you. Granted that it be justifiable to kill a man under any pretext whatever—though Heaven forbid that I should grant it! even for the sake of argument—but passing that, I say it is not justifiable, from any point of view, to cause the agony, the long lingering suffering, which must be the lot of these wounded, in these affrays, but not quite until death."

We all looked at Mike. He was thoughtfully rolling a bit of bread between his fingers and thumb, and staring placidly at his questioner.

"I quite agree with you," was his unexpected answer. "Your remarks are very just, and do you credit. Only, I may say, that if you wish to take me to task with them, you have got the wrong lamb by the tail. They don't apply."

"But am I not right in supposing you to have been frequently connected with such matters?"

"Certainly. I have seen many a man fall," said Mike calmly. "But, Mr. Chapin"—here he paused to sip his coffee—"I have never wounded a man in my life."

His words were pronounced with a marked deliberation and distinctness; their meaning was obvious. The Reverend Jonathan said no more.

CHAPTER X.

THE REASON WHY.

It was the evening before my marriage-day; a quiet, peaceful time, which will stand out in my memory with peculiar distinctness to the last moment of my life.

Every arrangement for the morrow had been made, and all Laura and I had to think of was how to make ourselves as agreeable as possible to our friends. For the last time our large family party gathered round the supper table at Eagle Tail Ranch.

What fun we had when supper was over, disputing as to who should wash up the things; for Sarah Brunt was away at the new rancho, to receive us on the morrow. The peals of laughter there were all round

the table when Mr. Temple announced that it was his turn, and gravely offered to wipe if Mr. Gillespie would wash. Then, in the midst of it Mike Alison, without a word, suddenly bore away the meat-dish and coffee-pot to the kitchen, and had to be waylaid on his return by Jack and myself and held prisoner by force; and finally how the discussion was settled by the tossing of a five-cent piece, dexterously manipulated by Mike, and which resulted in Nep and Jack being chosen for the office.

I was watching Mike's face in a lazy manner, remarking the change in its expression since I had seen it first. The wolfish look in his eyes had now disappeared completely, and the forbidding set of the lips, so noticeable when he sat among his gang at his own camp, was rarely to be seen. His face was no longer that of a man with a hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him; but rather that of a stern, melancholy man, who had lived a life for the past few years which had worn him to the bone.

"Where did you learn to play the piano so well, Mike? You quite took my breath away, last night, when you struck up. Is it really ten years since you were in England?"

"Yes," he answered briefly. "Ten years to-morrow, I believe."

"You remember the exact day when you left the old country, then?"

He replied with a quiet smile.

"It seems queer that I should, doesn't it? I think it's because the old days have been very much in my mind lately. I am among English folk, you see, for the first time for many years."

"Yet you don't like being reminded of your youth?"

The question was rather a rude one, but we all of us forget ourselves at times.

Mike smiled again, with one of his quick glances.

"No, I do not," he said simply. "It is interesting, but not pleasant. What is pleasant, though," he continued dreamily, "yet strange, is to find myself sitting in a ranche like this, among friends, after the life I've lived lately. Do you remember the night at my camp, Harry?"

"Can I ever forget it?"

He chuckled drily.

"By George! how you wired into us. What was it you said? A mean, miserable——"

"Don't, man! Let bygones be bygones."

"H'm! I'm not sure that it's always advisable; the other part of the saying takes my fancy most." He had finished his pipe and was leaning forward in his chair, as he spoke; he laid his hand upon my knee, continuing in a low tone, "Harry, old man, you may be surprised to hear it, but, do you know, I guess I'm going to follow this idea out for the future. I thought that there was a good deal of truth in what you said that night."

I started and caught hold of his arm.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. The old business has rather lost taste lately, and I shall give it up."

"No!" I exclaimed incredulously.

"It's a fact; but don't shake me to pieces"—and he laughed as I wrung his hand with all my might—while Laura paused in her winding with sparkling eyes, and waited for her turn. "Good resolutions, Miss Temple, are made to be broken, you know. I thought I'd tell you both, though, before to-morrow. It is a sort of left-handed wedding-present. Yes, old man, thanks to you, I have had enough, I think, of the old life."

This was news, indeed; almost too good to be true. But Mike did not give us time to express our feelings on the matter. For he now wheeled round abruptly, and addressed Mr. Gillespie.

"Did you ever know or hear of such a mild winter as this, sir?"

"Never," said the storekeeper, emphatically. "Not a fall of snow yet. We shall pay for it in spring, I dessay."

"Very probably. You've not heard any news of the Apaches lately, I suppose?"

"Not I. It's not often you do this time of year. A tidy scare we had in the summer, though. I thought we'd have trouble more than once. But we scraped through without any, except for what happened to you. He's a 'cute cuss, that chief they have now—Black Scalp—and knows the country well, it is said. It's a comfort to think that the Redskins have their reservations to go back to in the winter."

"H'm!" grunted Mike, drily. "I suppose they are in their reservations."

Mr. Gillespie laughed.

"Well, everything is possible in this country. Perhaps they've gone to Washington, and thrown themselves on the charity of the Quakers. I wish they would. Poor brutes! they've a hard time in winter. I think I'd rather be a nigger than an Indian."

"They take it out of the White man, though," said Mike, bitterly, "when they get to him."

Mr. Gillespie nodded.

"That is so. I hear two hundred families were massacred by Black Scalp in the Southern counties this summer."

"How dreadful!" said Laura, shuddering. "Are the women and children killed as well, then?"

"All," said Mike, grimly. "The men first, because they are troublesome; then the helpless ones. There is your poor Red man, Mr. Chapin!"

"Well, come, now," said Mr. Gillespie, mildly, "they have a poor time enough when they are dropped on by whites. How many would you calculate to leave alive, Mike, if you came across Black Scalp and his braves?"

"Not one boy," was the curt reply, "after what happened down South. Please to remember that I am not an officer in the United States Army. It would not be to my advantage to be always twenty-four hours' march behind the Redskins, as it was to a certain general we know of. The rank and file were not to blame last summer down South; it was their officers, who even refused to supply ammunition to the settlers when they had corralled Black Scalp. What sort of time would you have had in this county last summer if you had accepted the offer of troops, instead of taking the business in hand yourselves, and preparing quietly for the Indians to make a start? There is only one thing which will enable the army in this country to retrieve their honour. Put their general over a slow fire for five minutes, and threaten to repeat the punishment in as many weeks if he does not do his duty. Black Scalp would then be swept off the face of the earth in a fortnight."

Mr. Gillespie shrugged his shoulders, and flipped the ash off his cigar.

"It's quite true," he said, briefly.

"Then is this settlement in danger of Indian raids?" said Mr. Temple, questioningly.

"Not now," replied the storekeeper, with much promptness. "The railway will be at Stockton in March, and the place settled up wonderfully by June. But last summer and fall it was a near thing."

"They do not attack in winter, then?"

Mr. Gillespie shook his head, and smiled with the compassion of a Western man for an ignorant tender-foot.

"No, sir. Apaches live in tents, and,

when on the war-path, in the open air. The climate three hundred miles to the south-west suits 'em better than ours at this time of year. And there they will be now, starving along as best they may, poor cusses, upon what Government allows them, and the proceeds of a little hunting. Ain't that the case, Mike?"

"It is their usual practice," he replied evasively. "Miss Temple, now that you have finished winding that wool, may we have some music?"

The last skein had now left Kirk's unwilling hands, and Laura obediently folded up her work, and went to the piano. At the sound of playing Nep and Jack returned from their labours, and we then spent a pleasant social evening. But a tinge of sadness ran through it all. Mr. Temple was to leave for England very shortly, so that this would be nearly the last we should spend together.

At ten o'clock the girls retired. They were scarcely gone when the gruff shout of the Sheriff was heard outside. He had arrived two hours before his time. Jack went out promptly to see after his horse, while Mike and I turned into the kitchen, to fry mutton-chops and open a bottle of brandy, for a night ride at that time of year was no joke, and the man must be half frozen. To our surprise Jake did not appear until our preparations were almost completed. At last we heard the door slam, and his deep voice greeting Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Temple. When he came in I saw at once that something serious had happened. He was standing near the fire warming his hands, the other men looking at him in silence. The Sheriff made no movement when he heard our steps, merely growling out a "good evening" in the grumpiest of tones. I looked at the others for explanation with raised eyebrows, some instinct warned me that it would not be well to ask Jake point-blank what was the matter. But there was no satisfaction to be obtained from the surrounding faces. Jack's was as grim as Jake Blundell's own; Mr. Temple's bewildered; Mr. Gillespie's half amused. Kirk's threw the most light on the question, for it was very white as if with fear, his mouth was slightly open, and his large eyes were fixed intently upon Mike Alison. I followed them, and then started, for Mike was standing straight and stiff, his back against the wall, and his face wearing the look which had not been there for many a week. It was his voice which broke the silence now, a curious vibration

in its tone that reminded me of the warning he had given to the crowd at Menke's, after the shooting of Worral and Blossie; yet the words he used had been spoken every night since his first arrival among us.

"Harry, I'm going to the stable to water Leone, will you have a stroll round before turning in?"

I was about to acquiesce readily, when Jake kicked the pine log close to his foot and shook his head. It might have been an accidental movement, but I did not take it to be so.

"Thanks," I replied, yawning, "I guess I won't to-night."

Mike nodded as though he expected the answer, and moved slowly towards the door, his eyes bent upon the ground. As he turned the handle, he threw his head back in the old defiant way and looked at Jake Blundell with a watchful, questioning glance. It was curious to note how the look was met by the group near the fire. Mr. Gillespie nodded pleasantly and said "good night"—Mr. Temple also. Jack and the Sheriff neither moved nor spoke, but met Mike's eyes with a steady glare, which caused his heavy brows to draw down into the straight line, and his jaws to stiffen, until anyone who had only seen his face but a few hours before would have now almost failed to recognise it. "Good night, gentlemen," he said simply, passing quickly out, and closing the door behind him sharply.

The Sheriff drew a deep breath, and marched into the kitchen. "Of all the brazen-faced devils I ever saw," he muttered between his teeth as he went on, "that man is the worst." He would say no more until his hunger was satisfied. When he had finished everything on the table, and drunk enough brandy to have killed some men, Jake drew his chair round, and looked keenly at me.

"A few weeks ago, young man, I made some remarks about the cuss just gone out, which you did not like the taste of. Since, I have not touched on the subject with you, 'cos a man who only suspects, and ain't believed, had better say naught, till he kin prove his words. As I'm in a position to do that now, I bring the concern before you again; and here's things as they stand at this moment:

"Listen to this, then. A mile to the East of Stockton away up in the Sugareet Cañon, are camped near upon a hundred men. They're well mounted, and well

armed, and as they're mostly Texans, are as rough a crowd as were ever seen. These boys have been collectin' in this locality for some weeks past, but as it has only been gradually, one by one, they only reached their full strength a day or two ago.

"Now, Mr. Gillespie, and all of ye, what do a bunch of boys like that want in a settlement, at this time of year, when there's no round-ups of cattle, nor nothing. What will they be after, I say?"

The storekeeper shook his head, and as the Sheriff looked at him as if expecting an answer, he replied gravely:

"Can't say. It's very queer!"

"Ay," said Jake, "so it is—so it is, until you have the key of it in your hand."

"And that is?" said Mr. Gillespie quickly:

"Mike Alison, sir. It's his money, drawn from the bank the other day, which keeps them boys; it's his business they've collected here to do. Yes, open your eyes, if you will; the proof has come at last of what I said two months and more ago. Here is the leader and chief of them all, the deadliest shot in all this country, the man with five thousand dollars offered for his scalp, at the head of a hundred wild boys, all camped fair and snug in the very heart and core of this settlement."

"What reasons do they give for being there?" interposed Mr. Gillespie, in a hard, cold voice, "they must have some."

Jack chuckled sarcastically.

"Oh, you bet! They've as good a one as they could invent, Indians! Yes, though we're just in the new year, and the thermometer's at zero, yet, if you please, there's danger of a raid by Black Scalp, unless he knows there's a standin' army of White men ready to drop on him; that's what they say."

"Is that all?"

"All they'll tell me or you, or anyone but the man who gave me the first information, and without whom I should have known nothing."

"And who's that?" I said quickly.

"Hermann Menke."

I laughed.

"What! you would take the word of that man? Why, I'd believe Mike Alison's barest statement against the most solemn oath Menke could swear."

"Hold on there," roared Jake, "you don't know what you're talking about. I would not take the word of any man without proof. D'you think I've been idle?

I've seen the boys with my own eyes, I've heard them give the reason, just as Menke told me. Besides, that old fox knew me too well to tell lies. It was only because he'd been letting out Mike's little games that he did not get clean busted on the twenty-first of October. He's been watched ever since—he's being watched now—and none knows so well as he what will happen to him if he has been lying."

"Then what is Mike going to do, in your opinion?"

Jake paused a moment before answering. His face was very grave, and when he spoke it was in a gentle, impressive tone, with none of the violence of his former manner.

"Now, Harry, don't get the idea that this business gives me any pleasure. I'm bound to go through with it to the end, being responsible for the peace of this county, but I don't like abusing a man any more than you do, especially an enemy of mine, such as Mike has been. You ask what he's going to do? He's going to wait until you're settled on El Gato Creek, and then he'll play hell with you!"

"But he does not require a hundred men to do that."

"Yes, because if he'd much less, I'd be on to him, and he knows I've been watching him all along. With a hundred boys he's safe. I can't get near a crowd like that without troops, and I can't send for troops till I've proved some devilment's been done."

I shrugged my shoulders incredulously. But I began to feel cold and numb about the heart, for I could see by the ominous gloom of Mr. Gillespie's face, that his faith in Mike had gone at last, and he had been such a steady friend to him before.

"I can't see that you could stop the sacking of our ranche, by him, and half-a-dozen men, if he were quiet enough. Had he not made such a parade of force you would have suspected little."

"Would I? Do you remember what I said after seein' him at Menke's? Pahaw! he doesn't take me to be such a fool. You're right about one thing, though. He would hardly have made such a buzz about one ranche. But the information I have says that yours would be the first of a large number already marked; that there's a raid projected by Mike, such as we've never seen before. Mind! There never has been, in my twenty years experience of Frontier life, a desperado whipping round quite like Mike Alison, with his power of shooting, and his temper,

which makes him fight like fifty demons rolled into one, and seems to carry him through a scrimmage unscratched, where you or I would be plugged a score of times.

"The truth is, he's a devil. No more, no less, and he must be dealt with as such. Look at his face as he went out just now, was there ever a wicked pair of eyes in the world? Yet, I'll warrant he's been as sleek and soft as a tabby-cat all day with the girls. However, boys, there's one thing quite sure. If we can't break his bank this time, it'll be a pity. Eh, Jack?"

"We'll try," was the grim answer. "Are you convinced yet, Harry?"

I shook my head.

"But you think it looks bad?"

I would have given my head to have answered "No." But I could not. After a moment's thought, I said steadily, "Time will show. Say anything you please. I would trust Mike before fifty Menkes. But when you talk of breaking him, what do you intend to do?"

"Watch and wait," said Jake curtly. "There's half-a-dozen boys of mine in his camp, who'll give notice when a movement is intended. I've already been in communication with the Governor; and Colonel Bonner, Commander at Fort Campion, has orders to supply me with what troops I require at an hour's notice. I can't tell when the first blow will come. It might be to-morrow, though I don't think it. But I'm ready for him. He may show his teeth when he likes. And now, boys, we'll turn in, I guess it's just upon midnight. We mustn't over-sleep ourselves to-morrow morning. One thing more. Not a word to the women—but, hial! there's his step."

Mike now re-entered the room: he went straight to his blankets without a word to anyone, though his eyes swept quickly along the line of faces as he passed us. The others, also, with many yawns, began laying down sheepskins and preparing for bed. I did not follow their example. My brain was in a whirl, and picking up my hat I went outside, scarcely noticing the icy biting which met me as I opened the kitchen door. I walked away from the ranche in the direction of the creek. Could Jake's words be true after all? One thing was perfectly clear. Before I believed these statements, I would question Mike myself. As I reached this point in my reflections there was a rustle behind me, and Mike's hand was laid upon my shoulder. He had followed me. He did not speak for a

moment, but slipped his arm within mine, and paced beside me. At last he said :

"You're out late to-night."

"Yes."

"The Sheriff have much news?"

"Yes."

"Interesting?"

"Very. Surprising also."

"Indeed. What was it?"

His manner was perfectly quiet and composed, but I could feel the arm within my own trembling slightly. He was much excited, and had divined the subject of our conversation.

"It was about you," I replied. "It was asked why a hundred men in your pay should be loafing about town doing nothing."

The murder was out. He did not answer at once.

"And who said that they were in my pay?"

"Is it not a fact?"

"Yes."

"Then it does not matter who said so."

"I should like to know, exactly. But never mind. I can find out. Well—anything else?"

"There were conjectures made."

"And what did you think?"

"I—I did not know what to think, Mike," I turned upon him with choking voice, for I felt keenly how dear he was to me, and the pain of suspecting him was almost more than I could bear. "Mike, you must see how bad it looks. Tell me why those boys are there?"

"Have you heard no reason given, then?"

"It is said that you feared an Indian attack. That was all."

"Yes, I see. Well—that is all."

We were standing still now, in the bright moonlight, facing one another. He was smiling slightly, but his brows were still contracted, and gave a bitter, sardonical expression to his face.

"That is all," he repeated slowly.

"Then it is not enough," I replied, my breath coming short and quick. "Supposing you are right in what you say about the Indians; what object have you in protecting this settlement, every man in which, except myself, would rather see you dead than alive? Another thing is said of you. That the money lying in your name at Trinidad was all withdrawn the other day, and that you are paying these men with it. Is this true?"

"It is true."

"Then—then, what the Devil do you mean by it all?" My temper was giving way under the perplexity and distress of the moment.

"You would not believe me if I told you."

"Try, and see."

"No. I'd sooner leave things as they are. Look here, lad"—his dry, caustic tone had changed to one of great earnestness—"if it would make you see things clear right through, I would tell you everything to-night, just as it stands, though to say out what I should have to do, would be a terrible wrench. But I know that it would make matters no better. I could see from your face, just now, after Jake had said his say, that our friendship had broken. I caught you up and questioned you, because a man must always know how he stands. I see the position, and there's no more to say. You asked me to stay for the wedding, and I shall stay. Then—well, we won't meet for awhile. I've been living in a fool's paradise lately, that's all, and I must clear out. The words I used when you asked my name in Horse Camp months ago, were just the truth, we can never become friends. I've been a desperado for years, whatever I was before, and so I shall remain, I suppose, to the end of my life. You have realised this to-night for the first time, and nothing I could say would bring the old feeling back, so I am not going to try now. Come to bed. Don't look so down, lad. Remember, you are to be married to-morrow."

We returned to the ranche in silence. I felt dazed, stunned, tired-out, unable to think, or fix anything clearly in my mind. But somewhere about me lingered a feeling that no friend I had ever known was so dear to me as this Mike Alison, whatever he was, or might be, and that Jake's indictment was some evil dream or scare, which would disappear when faced boldly in the light of day.

We were none of us quite so early as usual the next morning, and Nep and Kirk Troy were busy preparing breakfast when we appeared. This meal was a silent one. Mike's old taciturnity had returned in full force, and all questions, even Laura's, received only the curtest answers from him, and I could see that not the slightest movement on the part of Jack or Jake Blundell was unnoticed. It seemed to me that the "watching" was rather on the other side. During the next few hours, however, my thoughts

were far enough away from the subject. The wedding was put off until sundown, as the Mexican herders were very anxious to be present. They were allowed to bring the sheep in an hour earlier for the occasion.

There was much to be done, and when all was over, there was only just time to slip away to our respective rooms and dress, to be ready by four o'clock. But the result of the preparations was felt by every one to be satisfactory enough to repay our labours. The service was to be read in the parlour. At the eastern end of this room was a reading-desk of cedar-wood, made by Jack, on which were Mr. Chapin's Bible and Prayer Book. The reverend gentleman was standing behind it at this moment, for he was a punctual man, and it was only five minutes off the hour. The large table had been carried away, and placed in the bachelors' sleeping apartment, and was now decked out with a damask cloth and a fine array of silver and glass.

The rocking-chairs and Mr. Temple's arm-chair had also been removed, and in their places were eight plain, wooden chairs, arranged in a semicircle in front of the parson.

All was ready, even the case of champagne, which was in the pantry, three bottles standing on the shelf—to be opened when the right time came.

The guests now began to collect and take their places; they were in their ordinary dress, though very much brushed up: with well-washed faces, and smooth chins, and boots scrupulously polished. There was Jake Blundell, big and hearty, one mass of burly good-humour, and exchanging sly jokes with Mr. Gillespie. The storekeeper sat between Jake and Kirk Troy, and, consequently, looked smaller than he had ever looked before; but he was as merry as could be, and the life of the party. Beyond him sat two Mexicans, José and Miguel Gallegos, the third and youngest brother—for we employed the whole family—being unexpectedly absent. The truth was, that he was only a lad of fifteen, and having spied a lynx just when he should have started for home, had gone off upon a royal cat-hunt, and was not to be looked for until the breakfast was ready, though, as his brothers said, he was sure to be back in time for that.

The clock over the mantel-piece struck four. At this precise moment the door of the ladies' room opened and Laura came

out, followed by her bridesmaid, Nep. The girls were dressed very simply, the bride in light gray, and Nep in yellow, trimmed with black. Very bright and happy they both looked; and Mr. Temple, who was standing near the door, violated all rules and regulations by heartily kissing them both as they passed him. Then we took our places. I glanced round the room as Mr. Chapin cleared his throat to stop a gentle whispering between the Mexicans. Jack was behind me as best man, blossoming out in a somewhat crinkled suit of blue serge, which had slumbered long in dark drawers, and a wedding-favour made by Nep, a decoration with which every member of the party was provided. Mr. Temple stood near the bride, resplendent in white waistcoat and gold watch-chain, ready to give her away. All the rest were seated except Mike Alison, who had taken up a stand near the window, and was now resting his arm on the sill, looking at Laura.

Mr. Chapin was a good reader, and well aware of the fact, therefore he read very slowly. The attention of all was fixed upon him, and only Jake Blundell heard a light footfall behind, and noticed that Mike Alison had abruptly left the room. With a step as soft and swift as a cat's, Jake stole from his seat, and, after a glance through the window, took up a position of vantage near the door. He was opposite to Laura, and, in spite of the interest of the moment, she glanced at his face, thereby failing to make a response for which Mr. Chapin was waiting at the moment. He looked from his book in surprise, followed the direction of her glance, and then stopped reading. For now the door opened, and Mike Alison came in with a grey, stern face, and behind him little Juan, the Mexican boy, panting heavily, his comical brown phiz drawn and distorted with terror and excitement. Mike did not see Jake standing behind the door, with his right hand concealed, and, without pausing an instant, strode quickly up to our end of the room, saying, in a firm, quiet voice to Mr. Chapin, "I fear that I must interrupt you, sir. This boy—"

Before he could get further there was a sharp click. Jake Blundell had taken a step forward from the door, and presented a cocked revolver at his head. The Sheriff gave no warning, used no threat; simply covered his man, and pressed the trigger. But, before the bullet flew, he hastily threw up the muzzle, and lodged his shot in the

roof, for Laura, heedless of all risk, had thrown herself before Mike with outstretched arms, forcing Jake to change his aim. The whole thing happened so suddenly that we were utterly taken aback, and knew not what to do or say. I had sufficient sense to follow Laura, and stand between the men, as she exclaimed:

"What does this mean? He shall not be touched until you have given your reason. What can have happened?"

"He knows!" roared Jake, now almost beside himself, yet not daring to raise the revolver again; while Mike stood perfectly still, smiling grimly at his old enemy.

"Yes, I do know," he said, quietly. "Thank you, Miss Temple." He took both her hands, and pressed them gently. "But you should not have done this. Let him fire, if he pleases. Jake, will you do it now, or wait till Juan has told his story?"

Mike motioned, as he spoke, to the little Mexican, who was jabbering excitedly to his elder brother.

Jake grunted, and lowered his pistol.

"Let him speak. But, Mike, if you move one finger towards your belt, I'll plug yer, so help me God!"

Mike made no reply, except to say a word in Spanish to Juan, who left his brother and pointed to the south, speaking in a shrill treble:

"Me on mesa just now, and see them coming quick, so quick! They be at ranche in few minutes—in great numbers—big, big numbers!"

"Who?" shouted Jack, for Juan had paused, as if his news were told.

"Who?"

"Los Indios! los Indios Apache!"

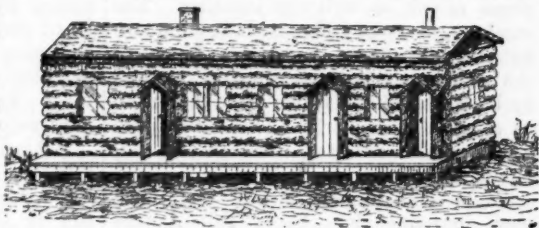
CHAPTER XL.

THE FORTRESS.

BEFORE we can go on, I find that I must describe exactly the house, in order that the nature of the attack upon us, and the siege which we endured, may be intelligible.

Everybody will very easily understand that there is no pretence of architecture or of beauty in the ranche house of the West. It is a log-house to begin with, though ours was of somewhat stronger construction

than most. It consists of four rooms, opening one out of the other in a straight line, all on the same floor. There is no upper storey. It is a long, oblong, building simple and homely, and its plainness—or ugliness, if you will—is considerably increased by the peculiar construction and texture of the roof. The way the roof is built is as follows. First, there is a flat surface of matched lumber, that is, boards grooved at the sides and therefore fitting into one another. These are nailed to great "vagas"—beams of pine—and the whole, which is a solid, flat wooden ceiling, is firmly secured by huge spikes to the log walls. The lumber is then covered over with many waggon-loads of earth spread quite smoothly until the whole length and breadth of the roof are covered to



EAGLE TAIL RANCHO



GROUND PLAN

the depth of two feet in the middle, and about six inches at the sides. Upon such a roof as this the rain may pour for days as hard as it pleases, here in New Mexico, without making any impression; for the earth, after the first shower, bakes from the heat of the sun into a smooth, impenetrable substance, which, if renewed in parts from time to time, makes a most effective covering—cool in summer, and warm in winter, and the cheapest and most easy to build. It is not, however, so picturesque as the English thatch.

The ranche faced south, all the windows being on that side. The reason for which was, that in spring, hurricanes of dust blow from the north, with a force sufficient to break any glass ever made.

I have already said that the rooms opened out of one another. I think the most remarkable feature of our ranche was the number of its doors. Every room but one had an outer door, which opened, like the windows, on the southern side, and there were besides four doors for inter-communication within. The three outer doors opened upon a covered porch or verandah four feet in breadth, and two feet above the level of the ground. This was constructed in order to prevent the place being snow-bound in winter; for though we do not suffer from many falls of snow in northern New Mexico, they are heavy when they do pay us a visit. Jack took great pride in his doors. He had made them all himself, and no other ranche in the country could boast of such solid pieces of oak, so well put together. The windows, also—of different sizes, from two to three feet square—had strong frames of the same material, and shutters secured by bolts, the like of which were seldom to be seen in these parts. These were also Jack's workmanship. Whatever he did, he did well.

Eagle Tail Ranche inside was much more imposing than Eagle Tail Ranche outside, though the rooms were furnished very variously. The one most to the westward, which was reserved solely for the use of the women—the only room with one door—would have compared favourably with the bed-room of any farm-house in the States.

There were iron bedsteads here, with snowy linen, all complete; rocking chairs, a pretty dressing-table, which the sharpest eye could not have detected to be a packing case turned bottom upwards, so well was it covered by the cunning fingers of Sarah Brunt; and upon this dressing-table was the crowning proof of civilisation, a large and handsome looking-glass. The next room, fifteen feet in length, was the parlour, our living room, with tables and chairs, and all the miscellaneous grace of a man living far from towns.

The room next to the parlour was smaller; when you entered it you felt at once that New Mexico was not in the heart of civilisation quite yet. This apartment was the bachelors' bed-room, and was able to accommodate as many people as could crowd into it, being furnished with true frontier simplicity. In one corner was a heap of folded blankets; in another a pile of sheepskins, three wooden chairs—two without backs—and that was all. The

floor was of rough unplanned deal. On the walls were a few prints from the "Graphic" and "Illustrated London News;" and at one end two shelves, one of which supported an innocent array of old mustard tins and pepper pots, containing gun-powder and shot of all sizes; the other bore piles of oblong yellow boxes marked with a big red stamp, in which were stored some five hundred rounds of rifle and revolver cartridges. Below these shelves was a spacious rack. Here stood two long Henry repeating rifles; three Winchester carbines; and four shot-guns, all in good condition, and fully loaded. Our revolvers we carried on our persons.

The fourth and last room was the kitchen, the sanctum of Sarah Brunt. It was furnished now with every culinary convenience the heart of a cook could desire. Until recently the principal articles in it had been a cracked frying pan, a coffee pot without a handle, and a tin basin. But times were changed. The "batching" days were over.

Behind the kitchen, on the northern side, was a pantry and larder; and to the east a rude scullery and wash-house with a tub in lieu of a copper, and a bucket instead of a sink. The larder, also, until the advent of Miss Brunt, only contained the carcasses of sheep and antelope. But now there were shelves put up, upon which was accumulated a savoury store of good things for the wedding.

Such was Eagle Tail Ranche, a typical log-house of the better class.

But I must not omit an important detail, an original idea of Jack's; though he little imagined, when he worked it out, what a difference it would make on a certain memorable day to all he held dear in the world. This was neither more nor less than a cellar, dug underneath the parlour, and of about the same circumference, which was used as a store-house for goods kept in barrel, such as potatoes and flour; and also, at the present time, for a case of champagne, procured in honour of the coming event, a hogshead and more of genuine whisky, such as no saloon keeper in the territory would dream of selling, and a few bottles of good English brandy. This cellar was a roomy place, cool, yet dry, lit dimly by a small skylight, fitted neatly in under the porch. It communicated with the upper world by a flight of steps and a trap-door in the centre of the parlour.

With the help of the two little cuts

on page 45, you will understand exactly how we held the fort against our friends the Apache Indians.

CHAPTER XII.

UNWELCOME GUESTS.

"Los Indios, Indios Apache."

We understood Mike Alison. He was more than justified now.

Black Scalp's successful raids down South this year, only whetted his taste for the path of war and his thirst for plunder of an unprecedented extent. The unprecedented dryness of the weather enabled his braves to bear the cold of these northern latitudes. With a deep, far-sighted cunning he remained concealed in the mountains until such times as all the cowboys, who collect in summer about the frontier towns, were likely to be scattered far and wide over the country, so as to render it impossible for them to be hastily collected. He had not heard of Mike Alison's men, and expected to find many an unguarded settlement at his mercy, and, alas for us! Eagle Tail Rancho was the first place struck.

The crisis was so terrible and so unexpected that even strong-nerved men, such as Mr. Gillespie, Jake Blundell, and Jack, felt as stunned and helpless as children for the moment; and the rest of us, unable by reason of our ignorance to thoroughly realise the danger, waited for them to act.

What could be done? There was no time to run away, for there were but two horses in the stable, and no defence worthy of the name could be made against the numbers Black Scalp would have with him. After making his first announcement, too, Juan told us how he saw the Apache scouts when climbing the eastern side of Eagle Tail mesa, and, how, having eyes as far-seeing as any Indian of them all, he waited until the main body came in sight, and the direction of their approach became unmistakable. Then, and not till then, the boy rushed off to the rancho at full speed. The scouts would be on the hill above the creek in half-an-hour.

"We're just corralled, boys," said Jake Blundell, slowly and heavily, thrusting his revolver back into his sheath; "unless," with an eager look at Mike, as if not certain, even yet, that he might not have had a hand in this, "unless those boys of yours are already on their way!"

"No," said Mike grimly, "Though,

had I known the location of the red devils, they would have been at them, you may be sure. But I could not tell where the attack would begin. I only heard that they had left their reservation, and I judged what was going to happen. And even for this——"

He stopped and looked meaningly at the Sheriff.

"I misjudged ye, Mike," exclaimed Jake hoarsely; "I misjudged ye, that's true; Heaven forgive me for it. But there's no time for begging pardons; fewer words the better. You're the only man livin' who can pull us out of such a hole as this. Will ye help us for the sake of these girls? We'll square accounts and settle the old scores—you and me—another time?"

"Yes;" and Mike held out his hand with a smile. "I'll do my best; I can say no more; that is, if you'll trust me."

Jake gave the hand a mighty wrench.

"I'll prove that, when I catch Menke. Oh! the lying, mean——"

"Never mind him now; there's no time. Juan," Mike caught the Mexican lad by the shoulder, "scoot to the stable, you'll find my horse, Leone, saddled ready, ride him to the camp in Sugareet Cañon; ride like greased lightning. Tell the boys there what's happened, and give my name and bring them along. Not a minute to spare! Sabe? Then be off. Quick!" Juan disappeared in a twinkling. Mike turned to Jack. "The boys can be here in two hours if he rides straight. Have you decided what to do meantime?"

"Shut up the place, I suppose, and try to keep the devils off till the boys come up."

"We can nearly all shoot," struck in Nep bravely, "except Laura and Mr. Chapin, and, perhaps, Mr. Temple."

"I will do my best," said the old man cheerfully.

"And there's plenty of ammunition," Nep continued.

"But supposing they set alight to the place. Are your logs fireproof?"

Jack groaned.

"Well, then," said Mike coolly, "I think I've a better plan, if there's time to work it out. Haven't you some whisky below here?"

"Six barrels."

"Enough to stock a saloon. Good! the first thing to do is to get that stuff out. If the Redskins can be started on it in a friendly way, we'd be safe for an hour at least. You going down, Jake? That's

right; but where shall it be put? Ah, I have it; across the creek in the herder's cabin. Look alive, boys! Now, Kirk, here's just the job to suit a strong man like you."

It is a fine thing to see someone with well-balanced nerve and ready wit, giving orders calmly and cheerily when most men lose their heads; but in such an extremity as this, the sight was almost divine, and had an extraordinary effect upon all who witnessed it. The entire lack of nervousness or anxiety in Mike's manner, the promptitude with which he grasped the situation, and grappled with it, completely transformed the staring, helpless crowd around him in the space of a few seconds. There was hope in the air; we had something tangible to do. Our ship, thrown on her beam-ends by a furious gust of wind, had righted herself, and under the firm hand which now seized the helm might weather the storm.

Mike's order was obeyed with as much quickness as could be expected of men whose only chance for life it seemed. Down the cellar steps rattled the Sheriff, followed by Kirk and the Mexicans; while Jack tore off to the stable for a rope, and with Mr. Gillespie to help him above, and the others pushing below, quickly hauled the whisky barrels up to the parlour floor. Meanwhile, Mr Temple, Laura, and Mr. Chapin were set to make a clearance of all the paraphernalia laid out for the wedding-breakfast — oh! our poor wedding-breakfast! — sweeping everything into the pantry, by Mike's directions.

Only Nep and myself stood idle. Mike beckoned us, and we followed him to the porch and scanned the horizon line to the southward. Though we could see a mile in this direction, there were no signs of Indians at present. We hoped to be safe for fifteen minutes yet, for long as the interval since Juan's first appearance has taken to describe, it was only a quarter of an hour.

"I can't see one thing clear," said Mike, shading his eyes with his hand, and stooping slightly, keeping intent watch for the enemy. "And I asked you to come here, as I thought you might give me an idea. The boys will get the whisky over to the cabin in time enough, I think. But who's to show the Apaches the way to it? Sarah Brunt would have been the one, for Redskins don't generally touch women when they're sober. But I fear they'll start scalping at once when they see men. I guess the only way will be for all but one

—myself—to hide down in that cellar. They'll never find the place out, for the only opening to it, besides the trap-door, is the window under the porch. I could be sweet with them, give the Chief some of the champagne, and then lead the whole crowd across the creek to that whisky. The sheep are in the corral, so that the brutes 'll be able to get a good feed, and there's plenty of wood on the pile for them to cook with. If only we can keep 'em busy till the boys turn up! What do you think of my notion?"

"Capital," I replied. "But I shall receive the Indians with you. You're not going on such a risky business alone."

He shook his head.

"No one must show his nose above the cellar but me. It'll be a chance even then. If there were two of us, it would be fatal. You don't know the Apache on the war-path."

"But didn't you say that they would not touch a woman?" said Nep quickly.

"Yes. But Sarah's five miles away. We can't try that."

"I think so," was the decided answer. "If Sarah could do it, I am sure I can. I have seen Indians before and spoken to them, often."

Mike started and looked at her admiringly.

"What! Would you face Apaches, Miss Gillespie? I never thought of it. Do you know the sort of men they are?"

"Yes; or at least I've heard, which is much the same thing. Any way, I am not afraid to try, if you think I could do it. I am sure I should be in far less danger than you would, until they've had their whisky, and then we shall be together, shall we not?"

"Yes. We must get out of that cellar as soon as they are over the creek, and blockade the ranche; for if the boys should be a bit late, we ought to have something between us and drunken Apaches. Well, Miss Nep, if you are not afraid, I certainly believe that you can do what is wanted safely. But you must be sure of your nerve. If there's the least danger of your losing it, leave the thing in my hands. Now, just think over this matter while I hurry up the boys, and see that all the arms and ammunition are in the cellar. A scout is on that hill. See him?"

His quick eyes detected long before mine followed, the black spot on the hill, an Indian scout lying flat on the ground.

"They will be upon us, Harry, in less than half-an-hour, now."

We went inside. All necessary preparations had been made. The guns, powder canisters, and cartridge boxes were placed in the cellar, and the Mexicans and Kirk Troy had deposited all the whisky in the cabin, afterwards nailing up the window and door securely, by Jake Blundell's orders.

"I thought it would be as well for the skunks not to get at it too soon," he said, in explanation, to Mike Alison.

"That's right," said Mike, looking about him thoughtfully. "Well, I think we've fixed up all we can. Yes, there's nothing more to be done till the brutes are on us. There's only one thing more to settle now. Who's to receive the devils, and lead them to the whisky? Miss Gillespie offers to do it alone. Will you let her?"

"Certainly not," said Laura, resolutely. "Let me go with her."

"You?" I cried.

"Do it together," said Mike, quickly. "It is safer for both, Harry. And two women are always better than one; the danger will be so much less."

"But I won't have it!" cried Jack, emerging from the cellar at this moment.

"Then I shall go without your leave," said Nep, firmly. "Why, Jack, you are not going to begin now to be cowardly about me? We will both go, and we shall be perfectly safe, for we are not afraid; and if anything happens, you will be close by."

"Can you propose anything else, Temple?" said Mike, quietly. "I am responsible for suggesting the idea. My experience of Indians is that if they meet with no resistance, and only see women, they keep quiet—at least until they've prowled all around, and picked up all they can find to eat and drink. They become troublesome then; but I hope that, before the whisky has gone, the boys will be here. We shall then corral Black Scalp nicely. What say you, Harry? Will you let Miss Temple go?"

"I know he will," said Laura, smiling, "if Nep is there."

It was the worst trial that I have ever known. To deliberately allow my darling to go unprotected among these wild, brutal men! I looked at Mike appealingly. "Are you certain that it would not turn out as well if I were to do it?"

"Quite. If they once began, it is not you alone who would be sacrificed, but

every living soul. Let her go. At the slightest scare we can slip up the cellar steps and fight it out."

"Then you may do it," I said, hoarsely. "But mind you do not wander from the house under any pretence whatever. Good heavens, what a risk!"

Jack sullenly acquiesced in Nep's desire, and the girls prepared for their ordeal. They hastily donned their cloaks, and Nep slipped into the outer pocket of hers a loaded revolver. We men made our way to the cellar, and closed the trap-door above in such a manner that it might be thrown back at a moment's notice. Every man was armed with rifle and revolver except Mr. Chapin, who, after vainly hunting for a weapon suited to his taste, held an axe as if he were afraid of breaking it, and sat on a flour-barrel, very much bewildered, and not a little frightened. Amid all the anxiety of the time I could not help wondering whether, if an attack occurred, Mr. Chapin would smite an Indian with his weapon, or drop it on his own toes.

By Mike's order we took up certain positions in the cellar, so that if a sally were necessary, we should not be in one another's way. At the top of the steps stood Jack, his head touching the trap-door, keeping it open about an inch. A repeating carbine was in his hands, and a knife ready to be placed between his teeth. Thus, at the first alarm he was prepared to rush to the protection of the girls. It was the place of honour, and he would give it up to no one. My place was next to him, and behind me stood Kirk Troy, armed with a double-barrelled shot gun, which shook strangely, as though the man who held it was trembling for fear. At the window opening under the porch, stood the two best shots of the party, Jake Blundell and Mike, each training a Henry rifle across the space of ground between the house and creek. It was here that Laura and Nep were to meet the Apaches first of all. Mr. Temple and Mr. Gillespie had their places behind Kirk Troy. The former was armed with a gun; the latter had his revolver and a knife. They were to follow us if we had to leave our hiding-place. The Mexicans were beside Mike and Jake, also armed with rifles, ready to join in a fusillade, when the first shot was fired.

Such was the position of the garrison, when the girls, after carefully locking the pantry door, prepared with pale faces, but

brave hearts, to receive their unwelcome visitors. Nep was to do the speaking, and take the initiative generally, and Laura was to be the handmaid, and assist in satisfying the requirements of the Apache Chief.

The sun had set for nearly half-an-hour, but the sky being exceedingly clear there was plenty of light outside, though within the cellar it was almost pitch-dark. When the girls opened the outer door of the kitchen, they could not help an exclamation of surprise, for covering the broad roll of prairie, at the bottom of which Eagle Tail Creek wound away to the south-east, was a large band of horsemen, approaching the ranche at a gallop. They were in two divisions, one striking for the herder's cabin, the other for the ranche; but when they saw the girls coming to meet them—for by Mike's advice they went some fifty yards from the house—the Apaches closed their ranks and swept onward, all together, with a long shrill cry.

This was the trying moment. The girls did not know what to expect, as the Indians seemed rather to quicken than slacken speed as they approached, and their whoop had a blood-curdling sound. Laura told me afterwards that she felt an almost irresistible inclination to scream and run away, and would have done so but for her companion. Nep, however, raised her head proudly, and laughed, saying with flashing eyes, as she noticed Laura's apprehensions.

"My dear, what's the matter? The cowards are only trying to frighten us. Come, let us go forward a few steps, and show them how little we care for their bluster. See, there is the Chief, the great Black Scalp, himself. He is coming to speak to us. I am so glad. Courage, Laura. Remember that the boys will be here in an hour or two at the most. Courage. Look up and laugh at them."

The Indians were now close at hand, as Nep spoke they drew rein abruptly, and only one man on a graceful bay pony continued to advance at full speed. He pulled up when he came within speaking distance, and then approached at a slow walk, bending forward, and staring intently at the girls between his horse's ears. The Chief was dressed in buckskin, decidedly the worse for wear, and fringed and beaded moccasins. A red comforter tied in a sailor's knot round his neck, and an old battered black hat, such as Mr. Chapin

might have worn when new, gave him a semi-civilised air, grotesquely incongruous with the rest of his attire. But his hard, marked features, and the long black locks which peeped from beneath the clerical hat, prevented any mistake being made as to his identity.

Black Scalp was a tall and rather fine-looking man, with a strong and expressive face, though his mouth was far too large; the nose inclined to be flat, and his complexion a bright red, the skin puckered and creased in a thousand wrinkles.

In carriage he was erect and dignified, as became his station, and, except when he smiled, his looks were not in the least repulsive.

At this time he was perfectly grave, and inclined his head politely as Nep stepped forward, and addressed him in Mexican—the language in which all conversation between them was carried on.

"Have you come to pay a visit to this ranche, Chief?"

"Si, Senorita."

"We are alone here, but you are welcome. There is wine and meat for you with us," pointing to the house, "and in the corral, mutton for the braves; and fire-water afterwards for all. You will not burn the ranche, Chief?"

Black Scalp looked at her with bright admiring eyes, and shook his head. The qualities an Indian loves most to see in women are audacity and courage. Here was this white girl, though absolutely in his power, offering her hospitality with a queenly air, as if he were here by invitation. He accepted her terms instantly.

"Ah, si!" he said in answer to her question. "We want food and drink. We will not touch ranchos. But let the senoritas cook at once for the Chief and ten amigos, plenty, plenty mutton, and—the Chief is very thirsty, kind Senorita!"

He bowed again, with a ghost of a smile about his lips which rather spoilt the effect of his first greeting, and then galloped swiftly towards his men, who were just about to strip the ranche of every portable article it contained, and then set a light to it. At a sharp order from the Chief, however, they slunk back, and the girls walked to the place unmolested, considerably relieved in mind.

But there was an arduous task before them. A meal was to be prepared for eleven men with the appetites of wolves. There was some danger, also, that the rank and file of the braves might set fire

wantonly to the herder's cabin, and the whisky thus be entirely wasted. Black Scalp, however, honestly kept his word; and though the wood-pile was ransacked, and a great part of the stable torn away, to supply the numbers of fires which were soon blazing in every direction, the cabin and the ranche were left alone.

The girls now went vigorously to work. The bachelors' bed-room, where the wedding-breakfast was to have been held, was lighted up, and a meal spread, the like of which I much doubt whether Black Scalp and his friends had ever tasted in their lives. In their eagerness to conciliate their grim visitors, the girls placed all the delicacies before them which Sarah Brunt had prepared for a very different party. There were jellies and custards, pumpkin-pies and wedding cake, as well as rounds of cold beef and ham; piles of soft light biscuits, plates of crackers, and a good substantial cheese. On the kitchen-fire two pans of chops frizzled away, manipulated by Laura, while Nep mixed batter with a rapid hand, and fried hot cakes by the dozen.

A savoury smell it was which floated into the cellar through the crack in the trap door. How our mouths watered, and our souls rebelled, as we thought of the feed these thieving Redskins were about to have at our expense. The only comfort was a thought of the Nemesis which would presently overtake them in the shape of Mike Allison's men. But the hardest trial of all was yet to come. Supper was now ready, and when Nep went to the outer door and beckoned with a smile, eleven tall Indians, making no more sound with their moccasined feet than if they had been a party of ghosts, solemnly marched to the table in single file, seating themselves in perfect silence and decorum. Laura then went into the pantry and brought out two bottles of champagne, at sight of which the guests, who had been looking somewhat askance at the jellies and custards, as if uncertain what they were good for, brightened up, and gave vent to their feelings in a low guttural chuckle.

Pop went the champagne corks. Nep poured the liquor out in tumblers, and Laura handed it round. The Indians now began in good earnest. This uncorking of the champagne was the last bitter drop to the listening folk in the cellar, and more than one member of the party relieved himself by heartfelt, though whispered, swears.

It was not long before the Indians

finished their meal. They were hungry, their teeth were good, and they wanted to get to the whisky. But they enjoyed the champagne, and drank bottle after bottle. And now Nep committed a blunder which well-nigh proved fatal to all of us. Instead of refusing to bring out more than half of the twelve bottles lying in the pantry, she opened all. Consequently by the time the Indians had satisfied their hunger and thirst, they were decidedly heated with wine, and therefore dangerous. The party was now less silent than it had been. The men began to use their tongues more than their teeth, and eye the girls with bright and sinister glances. At last the Chief rose, and made his way softly to the kitchen, followed by the braves, no longer in decorous single file. The girls were busy at the stove at this moment, and did not notice the movement of their visitors until they were close at hand; the Chief was at Laura's side when she looked up, smiling at her, and behind were ten pairs of eyes, all fixed upon her face, gleaming rows of teeth below. The sight was so horrible and unexpected, that she started violently, with a nervous cry, which if a little louder, would have sealed the fate of those Apaches, and ultimately of our own; it was only enough, however, to make Jack prick up his ears, and raise the trap-door another inch. The danger was most imminent, for as Laura moved, the Chief laid his hand upon her wrist, and his smile broadened from ear to ear. But before his fingers had time to close, the end of a pistol muzzle was thrust between his teeth with so much force that he reeled, let the girl go, and catching his foot in a frying pan, stumbled awkwardly back against the wall. His assailant was Nep Gillespie, who now stood between the Indian and Laura with angry eyes and closely set lips.

"What," she exclaimed scornfully, "is this Black Scalp's gratitude for good food and wine? When I asked him to sup in my house, I thought he was a great Chief, but I was wrong. He is but a drunken dog. Touch 'la Senorita' if you dare, and I will kill you as I have done many a braver man. *Mios amigos*"—addressing the rest in clear, authoritative tones—the men standing at a respectful distance, grave and sober, "will you taste my fire-water? Yes? Then come with me, for it is in the little ranche. And do you"—again speaking to the Chief, and stamping her foot. "Go first, drunken wolf!"

They looked at each other steadily, the fragile girl, and the tall, strong man, who was celebrated, even among grim Western settlers, for courage and power of will. There was a dull savage glare in his eyes now, yet the smile had not quite left his face, causing it to wear an expression positively fiendish. Black Scalp had not owned the control of any human being since the death of his father; the old Chief, when he was quite a lad. As for the revolver, it was but a paltry plaything, yet he was quelled. Perhaps he heard the stern demurring hum which came with an ominous unanimity from his braves; perhaps the steady eyes and clear sweet voice could do what it would have been useless for force to attempt; be this as it may, with every evil passion awake in his heart, the man obeyed, and passed out of the ranche, followed by his men. Nep came last, and closed the door, then took the lead, and went quickly across the meadow to the creek, up the hill beyond, and so to the herder's cabin. By this time the number of her followers had increased to many a score; and upwards of a hundred stood round the girl as she pointed to the cabin and said in a voice they could all hear and understand:

"Here is the fire-water, amigos, six great barrels. You are very welcome to it. But do not seek for more. Be content with food and drink and leave the ranche in peace. If you do not, I say that not one of you will ever see your homes again. The White men know that you are here. So be careful. Oh, be careful what you do!"

And then she went away, all standing respectfully aside to let her pass.

When Nep reached the ranche, she found Laura still near the stove, pale and silent, nervously watching six Indians, who had made their way into the kitchen, and were poking inquisitively about, examining the handles of drawers, peeping into the pantry, and helping themselves to scraps of the feast. At intervals they cast sidelong glances at the girl of no pleasant nature, but they made no attempt to molest her.

The moment Nep saw these uninvited guests she drew her revolver again, and sharply enquired their business. At first they made no answer; but at last one man explained that they were there by order of the Chief to watch the ranche.

This was very awkward, for the place could not be blockaded while they were about. Presently a happy thought occurred to Nep.

"Laura," she said in English, "go to the medicine chest, and bring me the laudanum bottle, we must send these little dears to sleep."

There were six bottles of brandy in the pantry untouched. It did not take Nep long to make a judicious mixture privately, and then blandly produce a full, well-corked brandy bottle to the communicative Indian. But alas! he would not touch it; there were evidently strict orders abroad on this point. The girls looked at each other in despair; but while racking their brains to devise another plan, they became aware of a curious circumstance.

All the Indians had left the room but one, and this man came softly up to Nep and tapped the bottle, which she still held, in a significant manner. It was delivered into his hands at once, upon which he drew the cork with his teeth and took several hearty pulls. When he had drunk his fill he went out, one of his companions presently appearing in his place, to go through the same performance. This happened six times, until each of the Apaches had swallowed enough medicated spirit to give him his quietus, had he been anything but an Indian. In this way the scruples of conscience of the watchers, and their love for alcohol, were satisfied at one and the same time. No white man knows the intricacies of Apache military discipline, and we can only conjecture that if these men had been court-martialled for this offence—which, for very good reason that will presently appear, they were not—they would have been acquitted on a plea of "no evidence."

However this might be, in fifteen minutes the watchers were as fast as rocks, the outer doors of the ranche were closed, Nep gave a gentle signal, and one by one the little garrison of ten crept from their harbour of refuge to hold a council of war.

The work of the women was over, it was now the turn of the men.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PAYMENT OF THE DEBT.

MIKE ALISON was the last to mount the cellar steps. As he reached the parlour floor he gave his orders right and left.

"This place must be closed, boys, smartly. Jack, fix those patent shutters of yours. Harry, bar the doors. Miss Gillespie, put out that light for the present; they must not have a glimpse of what is going on. Jake, get the parson,

Mr. Temple, and Kirk to help you with the heavy furniture for blocking the windows. José and Miguel, go into the cellar with that lamp on the bracket, light it when you are in the place, and leave it in a safe spot, then bring up the arms and ammunition, and place them on the table. Mr. Gillespie, take up your rifle, and keep a sharp eye round the kitchen and bed-room for spies, while I do the same elsewhere. Be spy as you can, friends. The sooner we're snug the better."

We were busy as bees in less than a minute, obeying Mike Alison implicitly. I do not think there was any order which he could have given that would have been questioned; and the first to follow his instructions were Jake Blundell and Jack, thus acknowledging in the most practical way how much they felt they had wronged him.

Half-an-hour later Eagle Tail Rancho was as secure from outside attack as the ingenuity of man could make it. Every window was secured with a closely-fitting shutter, strengthened further by furniture—a table against one, a chest of drawers against another, and so on. The doors were bolted simply, being too heavy and solid in themselves to require other support; and the one other aperture which it was necessary to stop, the chimney of the parlour fire—a space wide enough for two Indians to slip down together—was effectually plugged by rolling up two mattresses, and tightly jamming them into the cavity with the sides of Mr. Temple's bed—two stout deal planks.

There was no interruption to the work. The Apaches had all migrated to the other side of the creek, and were having a high old time with the whisky. It was only to be hoped that they would not leave the gate of the corral open, and let out all the sheep. On the porch the six watchers snored peacefully, little dreaming of what was going on so near them.

The blockade being completed, a halt was called, and the exhausted garrison regaled themselves with what the guests of the evening had been pleased to leave behind them. Happily, the stores were not completely used up, and for liquor there was plenty of brandy and water, though, alas! all our champagne was gone.

We now began to recover our spirits, and, as we munched away by the light of our kerosene lamp, to speculate coolly on the disgust of the Apaches when they

should return from their carousal and find out what had happened. Mike Alison, alone, sat apart, silent and thoughtful. In the presence of immediate danger his manner had been cheerful, almost to jocoseness, the risk and emergency seeming to act upon his spirits like a glass of wine. But this over, he became again grim and taciturn, though his face never at any time expressed the least fear or anxiety. His silence made us nervous, however, and it was not long before Nep asked him point-blank what it was he feared.

"Nothing," he replied curtly, "if the whisky lasts out. Everything, if it don't. Eat your supper now, and leave it all to me. I have my plans ready, if there should be trouble; but it all depends on the boys."

No more was to be got out of him than this.

How much truth there is in the old saying about ignorance. The boldest tiger-hunter in India is the "griffin" who has just arrived from England. The most unconcerned person on board a ship I sailed in once, when the jib-boom had gone by the board, and a squall had nearly laid us on our beam-ends, was a lad of fifteen, who was on his first voyage. "What fun!" I heard him say to the Captain, who clung to the taffrail, white as death. "This is something like a storm, now!"

Laura, it is true, was very pale and silent, and sat with her hand in mine, eating nothing. Her spirit was high; but thought of the look and the touch of the Apache Chief made her tremble. Nep, on the contrary, seemed to be in the liveliest spirits, and made fun by pretending to condole with Mr. Chapin upon the loss of the champagne in the wickedest manner. I felt strangely light-hearted, also, in spite of our anxieties, and a burning desire just to have five minutes—or less would do—with Black Scalp in a quiet place by myself. For one thing, my instinctive confidence in Mike Alison had been justified to the fullest extent; though why he should have felt it to be his special duty to take all the trouble—nay, to spend all his money—for the protection of our settlement, I could not understand. I was to learn soon.

The grave members of the garrison besides Mike, were the Sheriff, Jack, and the Mexicans. Jake, indeed, was as silent as our leader, though more at his ease, and applied himself to the cold ham and

brandy with immense gusto. In the midst of it, however, he suddenly slapped his leg with an emphatic, though whispered oath.

"Well I'm doggoned if we haven't missed one thing."

"What's that?" questioned Jack, anxiously.

"Why, we've blocked up every crack and cranny in the place. Now, how the deuce are we goin' to plug them cusses when they come from the whisky? They'll hammer the place down, and not get a scratch all the way through. Mike, how's that?"

"That's all right," was the quiet answer.

"I don't sabe. Mike, I don't sabe."

"No? I thought you knew the Redskins' ways, Jake. If they smell out a man, this place will be on fire in two minutes; but if they think, as they do now, that there are only a couple of girls, they won't mind working at the windows quietly for a good spell. At least, that's my idea."

Jake nodded.

"By George! that's so, boys. But look here, when they once dew git through, we can't hold the fort long."

"I know it. But we can make a very decent barricade with the bedsteads, chairs, and mattresses which are left, and give them a warm bath before they get to us. I reckon, by that time, to have the boys here, if Juan has ever got to the cañon at all."

There was a suppressed bitterness in his tone as he spoke, which struck me unpleasantly.

"Do you think they ought to be here now, Mike, if the boy had ridden straight?"

"We'el," he said slowly, as if he did not relish the question, "I would not wish to go so far as that; but it's a fact that the very second the boys know what has happened, they'll be on the way at a lively pace, and he's been gone a fair while. Hist! now, I hear a snake on the porch!"—he dropped his voice to a whisper—"The fun will soon begin. Clear away this ruck," pointing to the food, "that barricade must go up at once, in case of accidents. Ah, there's the first blow."

As he spoke there came a dull heavy thud; some Redskin returning from the carousal, had struck the kitchen door with his tomahawk. No more appetite for supper now. We sprang up and obeyed Mike's injunction with feverish haste. By

his order, we took off our shoes and stepped about as lightly as possible, no one speaking above his breath. Our ears were naturally very much open, under these circumstances, and we presently became aware that the place was surrounded by the enemy. Ghostly knocks sounded at the doors, some soft, some heavy. The voice of Black Scalp, decidedly thick in utterance, was audible more than once, asking "las senoritas" to admit him, "to say good-bye." Then crack went the glass of the parlour window, and we could hear the Chief vainly wrenching at the shutter with his knife. Now came a rustle and a scramble on the roof. Some enterprising individual was trying to make his way through, but soon desisted, finding the earth hard as baked brick.

It may easily be imagined the way in which these symptoms of activity outside affected our nerves. Happily, we had not much time to think. Everyone was hard at work conveying all the furniture in the place to the parlour. Here, Jake Blundell, the Mexicans, and Mr. Gillespie were skilfully constructing a barricade in front of the door of the girls' room. In the centre they placed the piano, flanking it with the bedsteads, the whole filled in with chairs and odds and ends, so arranged that the attacking party would have to pull it asunder piece by piece before they could reach those behind; and in all parts were cunning loopholes, through which the repeating rifles would do terrible execution.

The position of the barrier was chosen because, as you will see by the plan, the girls' room had only one small window, and no outer doors, so would make a good sanctuary, should the boys be late in arriving on the scene.

By the time our work was done, the guns and ammunition placed in convenient position, the siege began in good earnest.

Shrill cries of drunken braves were heard on all sides, growing louder and more menacing as the news of the blockade spread abroad. Now and then there was the vicious whirl and thud of a rifle bullet, men firing recklessly at both doors and windows; and, through all, gradually increasing in volume, came the steady thunder of blows upon the parlour window and the kitchen door, the places which seemed specially chosen for attack.

In five minutes from the time the first shot was fired, we were all behind our

barrier, Mike Alison, alone, slowly pacing through the empty rooms. He held a revolver in either hand, and was ready with a hospitable welcome for the Redskin unlucky enough to be the first to force the blockade. Before he took up this position, however, he had carefully placed us behind the barricade. In the first rank, kneeling and training their carbines between chair legs were the Mexicans, good shots both, quick hands with the knife at close quarters, and fierce and active as wild cats. Close behind, stooping so that only our eyes appeared above the barrier, were Jake Blundell, Jack, Mr. Gillespie, and myself. The two first were armed with rifles; Mr. Gillespie with a double-barrelled shot gun heavily charged with buck-shot, a weapon like a small cannon in cool hands; and I handling a revolver, to which I was most accustomed, carrying a ball larger than the bullet of a Winchester carbine, and with a rifled barrel ten inches in length. I was in the open doorway, and behind me Kirk Troy should have been standing with the Henry rifle he could use so well.

Alas! Kirk had to be left entirely out of our calculations now. He could no longer be counted on as an able-bodied member of the garrison. From the beginning he had been in a very perturbed state of mind, and this grew steadily until, when we reached the upper regions, after the watchers were successfully drugged, he could scarcely stand. The quietness of the place had soothed his nerves for a time, and he worked well in the blockade; but from the moment when the first Apache whoop was heard, he had dropped his gun with a frightened whimper and slunk away to the farthest corner of the room, as scared and nerveless as a little child.

In vain did Jake Blundell address him in rough, forcible language; in vain were Laura's attempts to soothe his fears and persuade him to help her in the work of handing ammunition to the garrison. He would do nothing but sit like a frightened rabbit, turning and twisting his great hands, his thin face white as death, his lips twitching convulsively, his breath coming in short gasps, and his eyes almost starting from their sockets in unreasoning, helpless terror.

The poor creature could not even say what he feared; but it was evident that his brain was completely turned. He was now at last, in very truth, a poor, useless,

gibbering idiot. So we turned our backs upon him and settled to work.

The other man in the party still unarmed was the Rev. Jonathan Chapin, who had ceased to have any confidence in his axe. At this moment he was of little more use than the idiot, though he tried with all his might to conceal his feelings. It would have been cruelty, however, to force the poor fellow into action; so he was set behind to tear open cartridge-boxes, measure powder and shot into right quantities, and place them ready for use, under the direction of Nep Gillespie.

Side by side with me in the doorway stood Mr. Temple, with another shot-gun. He smiled as he grasped his weapon, and said cheerily:

"I'm rather stiff for burning powder, lad, and my eyes are not as good as they were; but I've knocked over a few pheasants in my time, and I believe I can bag a bird or two yet. I'll try, at any rate."

"We'll hope that it won't be necessary, sir," I answered. But I felt little doubt about the matter, for, as I spoke, the blows upon the kitchen door were coming with such force that the whole place quivered and shook, and the entrance of the Apaches could only be a question of a few minutes. I could see that Mike thought the same, for he held up his hand at the moment, as if to prepare us for an attack, and then stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the bachelors' bedroom, with raised revolvers, waiting.

The lamp in the parlour, and another where the girls were sorting cartridges, were the only lights now burning. They were to be left untouched, for they would be of more advantage to us than to the Indians, as few of them would be armed with rifles. Civilised weapons are discarded when their brains become fired with whisky; it is then principally a question of knife and tomahawk.

We waited now in grim silence. Our orders were distinct and unmistakeable. The signal of the break of the blockade would be reports from Mike's pistols, as he picked off the foremost Apaches. He would then make for the barrier, the Mexicans covering his retreat. If their efforts did not effectually check the first onslaught, Jack and the Sheriff were to join in, and should a Redskin actually reach the barrier, Mr. Gillespie, Mr. Temple, and myself were to conclude the business.

There was a sudden lull in the hostilities. The hearts of some of us grew lighter for

an instant; perhaps the boys were here. No. For now, long, loud and shrill came the Apache whoop, and a storm of blows ten times harder than before rained upon both door and window.

A prodigious crash, and a howl. The door had given way somewhat quicker than had been anticipated, and three Indians went sprawling full length on the kitchen floor. Now came four quick reports from Mike's revolvers, two at a time. Oh, the yell which followed! Never were honest Red men so shamefully deceived! No pale trembling white girls to pray for mercy from men who knew not the meaning of the word. But in their place, with the bright moonlight which now poured through the doorway full upon him, stood a tall man, his eyes shining as green as a tiger's, his hands holding pistols which struck down four of their number before they had crossed the threshold. The first rank of Indians at the kitchen door were Nep's ten guests.

Before the Apaches had recovered sufficiently from the shock of surprise felt at this reception, Mike retreated to the next room, turning at the parlour door to fire once more. It was his last volley, however, for now the window, not far from where he stood, gave way before the furious attack; the table which had been blocked behind the shutter tottered and fell, and a flood of moonlight swept into the room.

Mike was now within the barrier. As he sprang over the side, the Mexicans opened fire at the door, and Jack and the Sheriff at the window, for we were now attacked from those two points simultaneously. The rest reserved their fire for closer quarters.

"Steady, boys," shouted Mike, in tones so sharp and clear that his words were audible above the yells of Apaches and the crack of the repeaters. "Not too fast, mark your men before you let go. Make every shot tell. Don't fire, you two," addressing Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Temple, who were getting excited, "until the devils are close at hand. Harry, come back, you must form the reserve with me. Now, Miss Nep, round the corner with you, keep away from this open door. Mr. Chapin, come here. Ah, your nerves are steadier, are they? Hand the cartridges to the boys, don't let those girls take the risk. Curse that idiot! I thought he'd have found spunk at such a pinch as this. My God, where are those boys?"

It was now upwards of three hours since Juan started on his errand, and we had

expected help in little over two. The only explanation we could think of was that the boy had lost his way. Like all Mexicans he was a good rider, and Leone was the surest-footed and fastest pony in the country.

The struggle could only last a few minutes. Though the continued fire of the Mexicans, Jake and Jack, mowed the enemy down as they made their first charge, and drove them back in disorder, we could see, from the lines of dark faces outside the windows, that their numbers were overwhelming, and every moment we expected to hear the crackle of blazing wood, and to find that the house was on fire. For some unknown reason, however, this common expedient of the Indian was not put in force on this occasion, the Apaches concentrating all their energies in crushing us by main force.

Now another yell, bad enough to hear on the prairie, and ear-piercing beyond all description inside a house, warned us that the second attack was coming; and pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, came the soft rush of fifty pairs of moccasined feet over the board floor. Then the frail barrier shook and swayed under the grasp of many hands.

"Fire, everyone!" yelled Mike, picking off two men who had climbed the piano, and were about to spring into the midst of us. We all obeyed with a will, and six Indians fell back, with cries more piercing than their yell. But the same moment part of the barrier gave way altogether, and a swarm of Apaches sprang at the opening. But Jake Blundell's great form was in the way, and, wielding a clubbed rifle as if it were a walking-stick, he rained such a torrent of blows upon the enemy nearest at hand that they tumbled back right and left in confusion; while behind, short, sharp, and quick as the bark of a terrier, came the reports of Jack's repeater; and the Mexicans, crouching with bare knives, stabbed every man they could reach who had a hand upon the barrier. Yet still the Indians pressed on, those behind treading down their wounded comrades mercilessly, and facing the deadly fire of the White men with the courage born of deep potations of fire-water and their own wild nature. Now Miguel fell forward with a groan, shot by some marksman outside the window. At the sound Mike raised his right hand, his pistol-bullet sped, and this Indian, when just about to pick off the Sheriff, dropped his rifle, and troubled us no more.

Another sharp order.

"Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Temple get inside and reload. Make room for Harry and me."

We dragged them back, for neither heard the words. And then Mike and I stood in the doorway, shoulder to shoulder, seconding, as best we might, the efforts of the gallant three in the van.

Jake Blundell was down at last. He had stepped too far from the barrier in the excitement of defending the breach, had been surrounded, and, in fighting his way back, received a blow on the head from a tomahawk which knocked him insensible. A rush was made for his scalp, as he was a well-known man; but Mike saw the intention in time. With a sharp cry, he sprang forward, struck down one Indian with the butt-end of his revolver, snatched up the tomahawk which was dropped, and, with a swiftness and fury literally demoniacal, cleared the ground of Apaches for two yards and more, and, seizing Jake in his arms, dragged him inside the barricade, turning again with the quickness of light to charge upon those who followed.

It was a remarkable feat of strength, and fully justified a comment made by Jake himself the night before, except that Mike seemed possessed by fifty devils instead of one. In this instance he both saved Jake's life and foiled the Apaches' second charge, thereby giving us time to breathe. Indians never keep up a steady, continuous struggle; their warfare is a series of furious attacks, between which intervals of several minutes often occur.

We looked at one another with haggard faces. Miguel was dead; Jake apparently so; Jack had a nasty knife wound in the leg which prevented him from standing, and José was spitting blood and so much exhausted that I had to carry him into the inner room, as soon as it was safe to move. The only able-bodied men were myself, Mike Alison, Mr. Gillespie, Mr. Temple, and Mr. Chapin. There was one drop of comfort for us. Our parson was no longer trembling with nervous fear. His face was still pale, but it was firm and hard set; his tall figure was drawn up to its full height; and when we had borne Jake into a place of safety in the girls' room, he grasped Mike's arm, saying quickly, "What shall I do? I cannot shoot, though I am willing to try; tell me what is best."

"You will fight?"

"I should not be fit to live, if I did not—now."

"You're right. Take that axe, then. Is it too heavy? No? Then hold it firmly and use it like a man."

"I understand," was the quiet reply.

Mike smiled: he was now quite his old cool self again, and the contrast between Mr. Chapin's previous sanctimoniousness, with his present warlike attitude and speech, struck his sense of humour keenly. As we hurriedly bore remnants of the barricade into the bed-room, he said to me:

"Parson or no parson, the good old Yankee blood comes out now; they have true grit in them—these New England folk, in spite of their long faces. The Southerners found that out in the war. I'll trust him now. What do you want, Miss Gillespie?" The girl had touched him on the shoulder; she had a rifle in her hand.

"Where shall I stand?" she said briefly.

"Jack is wounded, and it is my turn."

"In that further corner," he answered in the same tone. "We'll receive them there," adding in a grim whisper to me "for the last time, lad. If the boys are not here in ten minutes, they may stay away altogether."

The base of operations was now changed to the north-eastern corner of the girls' bed-room. Here Jake, the Mexican, and my partner were placed with Laura, who was striving to nurse all three at once. Nep stood over Jack, who could still use a rifle, and before them were Mr. Temple and Mr. Gillespie. Mike, Mr. Chapin, and myself now hastily erected a rough barricade before the group with the bedsteads, the arm-chair and a mattress. Over this the men trained their arms, as best they might. By Mike's orders, Mr. Chapin also stood with them, and before the barrier, with a revolver in one hand, and a tomahawk in the other, Mike and I stood to receive the Apaches' charge. We paid no attention to the idiot. He was still crouched in the corner opposite, silent, with livid, ghastly face, his teeth clenched, and a slight froth about his lips, his eyes fixed with glassy, vacant stare upon the door.

There was a stir in the other room. The enemy were creeping on. I felt hot breath upon my cheek.

"Good-bye, lad," Mike whispered between his set teeth, his eyes upon the doorway, "we may meet somewhere again, who knows? Here they come. Steady, all!"

Again the cruel yell; this time with a

triumphant ring, as they saw how few were left. The repeating rifles rang out, and Mike and I emptied our revolvers three times. Then they were upon us, and it was hand to hand. But we were strong and desperate men, fighting for more than life, and for the first minute, fast as they came, they were shot and struck down. Every drop of blood in my body boiled and sang; every muscle stood out like a band of steel. I was severely hacked more than once, and received many a wound; but I felt no pain. The only thought in my mind was how to prevent the Apaches from reaching the group behind the barricade. And back to back with me, felling two men for my one, was Mike Alison. Twice, when a knife was at my throat, and an Indian's hand in my hair, Mike dealt him a deadly blow. His eyes seemed upon me always, and that I ever lived at all through that time is owing solely to him.

But this could not last. In spite of any struggle we could make, though the parson's axe behind us cracked many a skull, and Mr. Temple, Mr. Gillespie, Jack, and Nep, poured an unceasing fire upon the enemy, we were pressed slowly, but surely, back, nearer and nearer to the corner where Laura knelt over the wounded men.

A sickening helplessness began to creep over me as I saw the dense crowd of fierce faces in front, and felt the yielding barrier behind. The struggle was hopeless. I tried desperately to shake off the feeling; but at this moment something struck heavily against me, and I found Mike's face, pale and ghastly, resting on my shoulder. He was severely wounded; yet I had little time to think of him. There had been a slight lull in hostilities the minute before, for no Apache lived who came within reach of Mike's arm. But they rallied as he fell, and we were swept over the barrier in a moment and pinned fast against the wall. I could not move. Part of the barricade had fallen upon me, and I was absolutely powerless. The rush of Indians was now past us towards the corner itself, where Laura now stood unprotected, and foremost of all sprang a tall Indian, wearing the unmistakeable lock of dark hair. There was nothing apparently to stop Black Scalp's course, for the other men were held prisoners like myself by the debris of the barricade, and Mr. Chapin, the only one on his feet, was guarding Nep.

We were lost; we were lost indeed!

But then—then—a most wonderful thing

happened. Such a thing I have never heard of before, and never read in any story-book or novel whatsoever.

Black Scalp never reached his goal.

Suddenly—high above the Indian's cry of triumph at Mike's fall—there was heard a most awful and extraordinary sound: the yelling laugh of a maniac.

When the Apaches closed in upon us, Kirk Troy rose from his corner, his face horribly, frightfully distorted, his gibbering idiocy changed to frenzied madness. He no longer trembled. His great powerful frame was nerved for action; he held out long arms bared, with muscles like strong ropes; his eyes gleaming in the strange light of the one lamp which had not been overturned, and the white moonlight. He stepped forward with swift and steady stride, pushing back the Indians as if they were so many children. As he advanced he laughed aloud—a screeching laugh—and he made straight for the Chief. He was close upon him when Black Scalp sprang forward with the leap of a leopard, and with upraised knife.

Kirk caught the hand that held the knife with his left, and with his right seized the Chief by the long black lock of hair. Then he laughed again. The struggle did not last a moment. He jerked back the Apache's head so violently that his neck must have been dislocated; and then, letting go the lock of hair, he clutched his throat.

We all looked on without moving, and before the rest had time to recover from their amazement, Black Scalp's soul had passed to the happy hunting grounds. Then Kirk Troy hurled the dead body of their Chief among the savages, and followed, whirling his bony arms and striking with Black Scalp's knife. He was in the midst of them fighting as only a madman can, with the strength of insanity.

Indians have a superstitious reverence for madness, and wavered from the moment that Kirk Troy appeared; when their Chief was killed, they gave way right and left, though a few stood bravely out, and the panic once begun, rapidly increased, until the Indians were tearing, hustling, and struggling to get out of the door, faster than they had entered it. In three minutes the room was clear, in another minute there was not a single living Apache in the place. Then back, with staggering step, came poor Kirk Troy. As he crossed the threshold, we could see that he was bleeding profusely, his hand pressed

against his side. He was silent, and I cannot help thinking that in some dim way his senses had returned to him. But this we shall never know, for he had not taken more than two steps into the room before he reeled, and fell. He never rose again.

And what now? In a minute or so the Indians would recover themselves, and then——

No! for there came a steady rumbling sound which made the ground tremble, and our hearts leap up in thankfulness—the thunder of a hundred horses' feet. The boys had come.

Crack! The reports of a hundred rifles rang out like a roll of cannon. A minute later and the place was full of cowboys, while unceasingly outside crashed the repeaters; now far, now near. The revenge party never slept that night; neither did they draw rein nor taste bite or sup all the following day; not a single one of Black Scalp's braves ever reached the reservations.

Nep's prophecy was faithfully fulfilled.

An hour had passed since we heard the tramp of the boys, and knew that we were safe. Our first care was for the wounded men, and, assisted by a number of the boys, we did our best to ease their pain, and discover the extent of their hurts. Among Mike's men was one whom they called Zeph, who had been surgeon's assistant in the Civil War; he it was who examined the wounded—we listened breathlessly to his opinion. Jack's wound, he said, was a mere scratch; Jake, who had now regained consciousness, would soon be right if he were only kept quiet; José, he shook his head over, though saying he would do his best; but, when he came to Mike, he said, quietly:

"He will live about half-an-hour, a few minutes less or more—no longer. You'd better hev him quiet to yourself awhile, for I kin see he wants to speak to ye. Prop him up, so. Now get some brandy. That's all I can do for him."

Mike had now come fully to himself, and was listening with a smile to these candid remarks. I could not speak, but beckoned to Laura, who was attending at the moment to the Sheriff. She brought the brandy and gave it to Mike. Then she knelt down beside the dying man in silence, waiting for him to speak.

"No," he replied, though she had said nothing, "I am in no pain, Laura—no

pain. But I cannot move—I suppose it is the loss of blood."

Presently he began to talk clearly and well, though in a low voice.

"Yes. I have more than one thing to say, and I must be quick about it, as Zeph said. So the boys came in time. Did Juan lose his way? Ah, I thought so. I knew they would not be two hours in riding here. A little more brandy, Laura. So—so—and you never guessed—you never remembered me. Why, I knew you from the first, though you were but a little thing when I saw you last. I knew you partly because you are so like Adelaide—Adelaide"—he repeated this name as if he loved it. "Well, I did not mean you to find it out, and if I had lived you would not. Laura," he paused here for a moment, and then spoke very slowly, "you are so very like your sister Adelaide, so very like Adelaide—when I knew her, and when I loved her."

We both started.

"Do you recognise me now?"

Laura shook her head with a bewildered look.

"No. You were a very little girl—and I am altered—Heaven knows that—altered out of all recognition. Well, then, I am Harold Courtney."

Laura looked intently at the haggard face.

"Oh yes! I see it now," she cried excitedly. "I remember you. When I was a child you often came to see us. You were at Oxford with Tom Copley—Adelaide's husband."

"Yes—and something more than that—but you were very young and didn't know."

"Something more? Oh! Mike—Harold—that we should owe our lives—once—twice to you! Oh! if Adelaide knew!"

He raised his head and spoke fiercely between clenched teeth: "I loved Adelaide, Laura. I loved her before he ever saw her. Why, it was I who introduced him to her first of all. I tell you she should have been my wife." A fit of coughing now came on, and choked him. In a little while he continued quietly:

"We won't say more about it now. It was the old story. I cared for her a long, long while, and I thought she was beginning to return it. Then I spoke, and found that it was too late; she was already privately engaged to—to Tom. Well, I left England before I did any harm, that is

all I can say for myself. I've been what you have heard since. But there's one thing I want you to know—I want you to tell her, Laura. What I've done for you was partly for her sake—not all, for I owed a debt to Harry—but, you were like her. I could not let you be in any danger—for her sake—so I spent my money—hoping that the Apaches would hear of the boys, and leave the settlement alone. And now, there's one thing more. Harry, I said last night that I'd stay to see you married. Will you let me? Will you be married now, so that I may feel quite sure that all is right and safe before I die?"

I stooped and kissed him. I might live a hundred years, but I should never have again such a true and loving friend. Then I looked at Laura, and she rose to speak to Mr. Chapin.

The parson came forward readily; he was bruised and sore, but otherwise little the worse for the fight, though his white tie had been torn from his neck, his black coat was in tatters, and his long, pale face plentifully streaked with blood.

While a few preparations were being made, Mike lay still with closed eyes. But he opened them suddenly, hearing his name pronounced. Jake Blundell was speaking to Mr. Gillespie.

"Tell Mike," he was saying feebly, being very weak and ill, "that before he's clear off the hooks, I'd like to know that he bears no ill-feelin'. I misjudged him very bad. If I were not so sick I'd go to him. Do it for me, will ye?"

Mr. Gillespie crossed over to the dying man.

"Can't you bring him near?" he said faintly, "where I can see him. Then I'll answer him myself."

They moved the Sheriff, and the two men lay side by side. With great difficulty Mike stretched out his hand and laid it upon that of his old enemy. Jake held it close.

"Can ye forgive me, Mike?" he whispered. "As I said a'ready, I were misled, misled from beginnin' to end."

And the other smiled upon him, and tried to return the pressure.

"It's—all right—all right, Jake. You did your best."

His voice was very faint now, though his eyes were bright and clear.

And then the wedding-service was concluded.

Was there ever a stranger, wilder wedding?

A cowboy held the only lamp—the kerosene lamp—that had survived the fight. All round us lay the bodies of the dead and wounded. Here lay José, dying fast; here lay the long limbs of Kirk Troy, stiffened in death; here Jack sat, his leg bandaged; here was Miguel, dead; here the corpse of Black Scalp. The light of the lamp fell upon these witnesses of the marriage. It fell upon the grey eyes and pale face of Mike, who had saved us; it fell upon Nep, her face no longer smiling, but soft and tearful; and fell upon the bride—her white dress torn and stained with blood. And it fell upon the bridegroom—what a bridegroom! My coat hung in strips; my shirt was torn off my arms; a great gash on the left hand gave me only two fingers to hold the ring; and my face was black with powder, and streaked with blood. For spectators we had besides half-a-dozen of Mike's cowboys, their wild faces wearing an expression of unwonted softness, and their voices answering with a deep "Amen" to the simple prayer with which the clergyman concluded the service.

Mike was lying quite still now, a peaceful smile on his face, his hand in Jake Blundell's, his eyes upon Laura.

"Thanks, old lad," he said faintly. "Laura, will you kiss me?" She did so with a sob. "Now, Harry." As my lips touched his, he murmured softly: "Lad, I've paid my debt, at last."

"Oh, Mike!" I cried bitterly. "There must be some hope. You will not die now, after all! I cannot bear it!"

"Hush, Harry. It's—right. I do not wish to live. If I lived I should only be worse than ever, perhaps. I want you to be happy, and you will—you and Laura," his voice had fallen to a whisper, his eyes were getting dim. "Good-bye—dear lad—Laura—you'll—tell—Adelaide."

This was his last word. Slowly the light died out of the big, grey eyes; almost imperceptibly the breathing stopped; his head fell back. Mike Alison was dead.

The Right of Translating any portion of "I'LL TELL THEE, DICK, WHERE I HAVE BEEN," is reserved by the Author.

THE EXTRA

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OF

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

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"A FANTASY" IN FANCY DRESS.

By "RITA."

Author of "*Gretchen*," "*Dame Durden*," "*The Ladye Nancy*," "*Darby and Joan*," etc.

CHAPTER I. HOW THEY MET.

"FOLLY" was sitting on a low seat, under the branching palms, in the great conservatory. There was only a dim, subdued light; but the beautiful glow of colour threw up the green of foliage and hue of flower, and the gleam of marble statues on their pedestals, and the rich Eastern rugs scattered about on the tessellated floor.

Beyond was a gorgeous vista of rooms opening one into another, and all thronged with a motley crowd in every species of attire that comes under the wide nomenclature of "fancy dress."

Soft, sad strains of waltz music rose and fell on the air. The various couples moved and swayed in harmonious unison. It was a scene to inspire admiration, pleasure, excitement; but not one of these emotions was visible in the pale, calm face and tired, dark eyes of the woman who, garbed as Folly, sat watching the scene with a faint, disdainful smile on her lips.

"Since when has Folly taken the part of Wisdom? To sit aloof and to satirize the giddy crowd of pleasure, is surely not her province," said a voice beside that quiet figure.

She looked up. A scarlet-clad Mephis-

topheles was leaning against one of the slender columns that supported the glass roof above.

"May not even Folly have her hour of satiety?" she said, and the soft tones of her voice had in them a tired ring, even as her eyes had a tired look. She met the eyes above her calmly and steadily, with no pretence of prudery at the unceremonious introduction of another personality on her self-chosen solitude.

"Doubtless; but not among the circle of her own votaries. Surely there her eyes should sparkle, her laugh should ring out, her step should be the lightest in the dance, her voice the gayest in the jests." Then his own voice took a lower and more impressive tone, and his eyes, at once bright and cold, flashed a direct glance into those uplifted to his face. "Once," he said meaningly, "they were both gay and light. Have two years so changed them?"

The woman's face paled, her eyes flashed angrily. "What do you know of me?" she demanded. "You are a stranger . . . I have no recollection of you?"

"No," he said, still bending that cold searching gaze upon her agitated face. "You are right; you do not know me personally, as the world counts acquaintanceship."

"Then," she said, her lips trembling a little, her face flushing with a sudden sense of anger and surprise, "why do you speak of two years ago? I—I was not married then."

He smiled. "Two years ago," he said,

"on a night in June, such as this, in a scene such as this, a warning came to you. Have you forgotten?" Slowly the colour faded; the eyes that met his strange, inscrutable gaze had a frightened, appealing look. "You have not? I see that," he continued. "You paid no heed to the warning. Was it not prophetic?"

She shivered and glanced from side to side in momentary terror. "In Heaven's name," she cried hoarsely, "who are you? . . . Why—why are you here again? To prophesy more evil . . . or to gloat over the fulfilment of what has already overtaken me. . . ."

Then a faint sob rose in her throat, her hand closed almost fiercely on the tinselled Punchinello that she held. "Oh," she whispered, "if I had only listened . . . if I had only believed!"

"You are not the first woman who has uttered that lament," he said calmly. "Nor will you be the last. But you wrong me when you think that I would 'gloat' over a misery which I foresaw. Accident—if it be accident that unites the current of human lives from time to time—brought us face to face once. I could not help the impulse that bade me warn you. When I entered these rooms to-night, and saw you enter on your husband's arm, I knew that my warning had been verified."

"Who are you?" she asked wonderingly.

He smiled slightly and touched the small scarlet cap he wore. "If I told you my real name," he said, "you would not recognise it as anything remarkable. I am to you as an evil prophet—that is all."

A faint scornful smile curled her red lips. "You talk," she said, "in strange fashion for a nineteenth-century ball-room. I don't care for mysteries."

"All life is more or less a mystery," he said gravely, "to any one, at least, who cares for more than a surface view of it. Sensation, antipathy, regard, hatred, love—are not all these mysteries? Is not the distance between two minds a mystery? The bodies may be united by all the forces of law and nature, but the souls have never for one moment touched each other in recognition."

She shivered and grew pale. Well enough she knew the truth of those words! Well enough had she realised the folly that had made a girl's passion for a handsome face the crown of shame for a woman's brow!

"I have no privilege of friendship," went on those calm, measured tones beside

her; "no claim on your attention—yet I, alone of all this sparkling crowd, can read your heart and sympathise with what I see there."

"And what do you see?" she asked suddenly. The question startled herself; she had not meant to put it, and her voice seemed to her the involuntary utterance of an impulsive thought.

"Rebellion," he said gently, "and jealousy more fierce than hate because it is ignoble, and knows itself to be so. It claims the shadow of a truth—knowing that it has lost the substance."

"Oh, hush! for Heaven's sake, hush!" cried the woman fearfully. She was pale as death, her lips were quivering. Then, a sudden storm of passionate wrath swept over her. "How dare you say such words!" she went on in a low, restrained voice, "How dare you! You do not know. You cannot tell——"

He bent towards her. There was something in his calm, grave glance that involuntarily checked the tide of rising passion and made her mute with sudden shame. "Take my arm," he said gently, "and come with me. They are approaching."

She rose at once. Her eyes glanced around in a startled and dismayed fashion that told of broken nerves and weakened will. Her hand rested on the proffered arm, and she felt herself being borne along in the midst of a crowd. The waltz was over. The dancers were scattered in a gay and motley throng all through the lofty, flower-decked rooms. The Mephistopheles and his companion came suddenly face to face with a singularly handsome man, who was bending slightly towards the woman who had been his partner—a lovely blonde, with dark-lashed eyes and sunny hair. They heard the tender murmur of low-spoken words, a rippling laugh—then the crowd swayed forward, and they were alone once more. Alone amongst numbers, for solitude creates itself, and there can be solitude in the circle of fashion as on the mountain heights; and no one among that gay and glittering throng ever suspected that Myra Ashburton was an unhappy and disappointed wife, any more than they suspected that Rashleigh Ashburton was not the most perfect of husbands. Young, rich, handsome, popular, what more had they to desire of life?

Yet, perhaps, no wider gulf ever stretched between the known and the unknown than between the minds, natures, and characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton. But two

years before they had been wedded. She an heiress, young, lovely, and gifted; he, the youngest son of a baronet, handsome, wild, popular, extravagant, and poor. That he was poor had been a matter of congratulation to the beautiful and somewhat wilful heiress. Of the extravagance she knew nothing; neither of the wildness which popularity had glossed over, and Society ignored. But, to-night, how she remembered all the folly of that past fascination; to-night, when she saw the homage that had been hers bestowed on another woman; to-night, when the tender words and impassioned looks were all for the rival she had learned to suspect before even the first few weeks of wedded life had waned and passed away. For Rashleigh Ashburton had never loved but one woman in his hot, mad youth, and that woman had been separated from him by adverse fate, only to shine across his path once more, free, wealthy, lovelier than ever, one month after he had sacrificed his own freedom at the shrine of Mammon and on the altar of matrimony.

He cursed his own folly and precipitancy when first the blue, dark-lashed eyes, and siren smile of Frances Lady Leintworth shone once again over the path of his life. He had no strict views of morality; no strong principles to ballast a naturally weak nature; no belief in anything that did not agree with material comfort and pure self-gratification. To such a man temptation could only come in one guise, and be regarded in one light—that of a personal wrong to himself. He had not sufficient self-restraint to deny himself the companionship of his temptress, nor sufficient manliness to refrain from visiting on his innocent wife the evil effects of such companionship.

Day by day the gulf widened; a veiled animosity was succeeded by intolerance, then by dislike; gradually it became a mere pretence of conjugal affinity—a mask worn for society and the world at large, to be dropped at the entrance-hall of that most unhappy home.

It was the mistress of that home who, to-night, in bitter irony, had garbed herself as Folly, and gone to make one of the spectators of her own shame and her own misery. For to-night she knew she would meet her rival face to face at last; and to-night she had met her, while they passed as strangers pass, while her hand rested on the arm of the man who had foretold the misery that was now her portion.

Mechanically, as one in a dream, she went on where he led her—seeing nothing but that brilliant, mobile face, hearing nothing but the dull, heavy throbs of her own heart. He did not speak; he was far too wise to intrude commonplace speech where he knew that silence was the best expression of sympathy. But he guided her through the crowd, and, at last, opening a window at the end of the ball-room, led her out into a balcony draped with scarlet, and gay with flowers, and then, releasing her arm, stood silently beside her, as her sad and feverish eyes turned to the dark, still trees, and the quiet stars beyond.

At last she spoke. Her voice was hard and cold; to him it only betrayed the rigid self-control that strove to keep in leash her tears.

"I cannot tell," she said, "how you know. But it does not matter now. All the world will soon do the same. I—I cannot always act."

"I am afraid," he said gently, "that there will be no need. Both are unscrupulous; and they will not care how you suffer. Do you understand my meaning now? If you had waited one month, one little month, Rashleigh Ashburton would have known she was free, and you would have been saved. One pang, one sharp, quick stroke of pain. But it would have been salutary then. Now——"

"Yes," she said faintly. "I know what you mean. The influence has had its effect. I am no longer a girl—dreaming, loving, credulous. I am a woman, whom sorrow and treachery have embittered, and made harsh and cruel."

"Not that, I hope," said her companion gently. "The lesson should be salutary, not pernicious."

"I grow afraid of myself," she said wildly; "afraid of my own thoughts. I gave him all—all; and look at what he has made of my life—what he may still make of it!"

"You must not allow him," he said earnestly. "Your life is your own. It is a gift for which you will be held responsible. If the influence around it is bad, withdraw it from thence. The woman who suffers her moral and spiritual purity to be desecrated by vicious forces or evil counsel, commits a sin against herself, the effects of which she cannot control, and the extent of which she cannot restrain."

"But what can I do?" she said helplessly. "He does not care. I sometimes think he never loved me. Still—I am his wife."

"Oh, wise human laws!" exclaimed the man beside her, with a strange bitter laugh. "Laws which would chain the mutable and the infinite, and link together the gross and the pure in one ignoble bondage! What can you do, you ask. What have you the moral courage to do, is the real question. Would you strip off the mask, cast aside the pretence—say honestly: 'My husband is no husband to me; has never by word, or deed, or thought, kept the spirit of his marriage vows. He hates me, and I—in time—shall grow to hate him, and shall live out my lonely days and nights in bitter and revengeful plans which will make my heart black with guilt, though to the world my hands may still be clean, and my lips still smile their lie of happiness?' Ah—you shudder! Yet that is what I see in the future—the future of the girl who, two years ago, had not a guilty thought, an ignoble ideal, an unworthy impulse."

"Oh, hush, hush!" she cried. "You terrify me. How can you read my future? Why should I become so vile? And yet"—and she wrung her hands in a momentary passion of grief—"you have only spoken out my own fears. I am wicked, and I shall grow worse. I am a proud woman. I cannot always bear my wrongs in meekness and silence. Oh, what are you that you can so wisely read my heart?"

"I am only a mortal like yourself," he said, as she paused abruptly to look up in his calm, inscrutable face. "A man who has gauged the worth of worldly pleasures, and the varieties of all earth's joys; who looks below, not on, the surface of life for its truth and reality." Then his voice grew lower and more mournful, and she listened with something of fear to its haunting tones. "I stand alone. I have let all human ties drift from me without regret, because I have learnt that happiness is only a dream; that no living heart ever responds fully and entirely to another. There is always a secret between mortal lives, however near, however dear. The secret of the true self—that is never fully revealed—that is so strange a mystery, the bravest shrinks from full investigation."

She shivered in the warm June air. A sense of bewilderment, of fear, oppressed her as with sudden weight.

"Surely," she said. "I remember you. We have met." She started to her feet. "Oh," she cried, and pushed back the thick, soft hair from her throbbing temples.

"What is this? I see trees; a strange, dark grove; the early morning light. Yes, it was there—and yet—and yet how long ago?"

"More years than you can number if we count time as mortals count it," he answered gravely, and his eyes glowed with a strange, deep light. "But you are right. Once we stood soul to soul—you and I—but that time has passed. I could have helped you had you listened to my warning; but you would not. You signed your own doom, and I can do nothing for you now. Some peace I might give; some dream that would lull that sharp ever-living sense of misery; but the waking would be more terrible, for such a dream would show you the unveiled heart you have worshipped as true; the falseness and perfidy that now you only suspect."

"You could do this! You could let me see him as he is—know the depth and extent of his treachery!"

"I could; but do not ask it. The waking would be too fearful for your strength. Your own suspicions are near enough the truth. Why seek for greater certainty?"

"Because I would fain know if I am powerless to influence him still. I could be patient if I saw Hope in the future."

"He is with your rival now. See and hear for yourself the hopelessness you already realise; yet blame me not for the pain you voluntarily seek."

"I will not blame you," she murmured faintly, as she sank back on the cushioned seat. Her eyes closed; a strange, dreamy stupor seemed stealing over her lulled and passive senses.

When again she looked up she was alone beneath the quiet summer stars.

CHAPTER II. HOW THEY PARTED.

It seemed as if the face of heaven lay open before her eyes, and a strange dazzling light streamed around and about her. Faces and forms flitted shadow-like through that brilliant radiance; strange thoughts seemed to throb in her brain; her soul awoke as from long slumber and set in strange array before her the enigmas and mysteries of life. To what end were they all, if but for three-score years of travail, and sorrow, suffering, and shame, and then death?

And as she so thought and wondered in the feverish pain of her own grief, a soft and subtle darkness, like the shadow of a cloud, seemed to fall around her, and, from

out its vague and misty depths, a face looked back to her own. She looked at it—not startled or afraid—but with some dim sense of recognition, and, as she gazed, she saw that it was her own face and form; and all that was conscious and struggling within her brain seemed suddenly to escape from its physical tenement, and she found herself once more in the conservatory of palms.

The waltz-music was sounding again. The motley crowd were circling to its rhythm; but among the dusky floral shadows, lately tenanted by herself, two people were pacing to and fro, and talking in low and passionate whispers. They passed her so close that the soft satin folds of the woman's dress seemed to touch her feet; yet they never seemed to see her. Their words fell on her ear with startling distinctness.

"Frances, do not play with me. It is life or death. If I loved you before, I love you ten thousand times more dearly now. She—that poor faint shadow who stands between us—has never been in my heart for one single hour. And now we are as strangers—or foes. When I look at her in my house and home, and think of who should be its real mistress, I feel as if I could kill myself for my folly."

The woman by his side turned pale.

"Do not do that," she said. "Fate may be kind to us yet."

"That," he said bitterly, "is so probable. When do things ever come right in this world? And I—how can I bear this torture day after day, month after month? I have been a fool. Good Heavens, what a fool! If I had only waited; if I had only guessed!"

She shivered suddenly.

"It is cold here," she said. "The air seems to have grown chill."

"I wish I could feel it," he said. "My heart is burnt up with love and despair. Frances—"

"Hush!" she said. "Do have a little discretion. We shall be overheard, and perhaps your wife will make you a scene—if she ever does anything so ill-bred. She looks like the tragic Muse.

"Do not speak of her," he entreated. "Speak only of ourselves. The opportunities of seeing you alone are few and far between."

Her light laugh rang out once more.

"My friend, we must pay a little regard to the world's opinions. A woman has always something to lose. Now you—

well, the world can hardly say worse of you than it has said. But I am different; my freedom is pleasant enough; but it bristles with responsibilities. If we were South Sea Islanders now——"

"I wish to Heaven we were," he said, "if that fact would give you to me. My life is valueless without you."

"And probably," she said, with a little ironical smile, "if Fate had given me to you, you would be making just such a speech to—another woman."

"I think," he said savagely, "you know me better than that. Of all living women I never cared for any but yourself."

"It is madness—now," she said faintly. "What can we do, you and I? I am not one of those women who can wreck their whole lives for a mere passion. For that is what all men's love consists of—a passion of longer or shorter duration, but still like the toy of the child, the value of which lessens with the fact of possession. It is true that I would marry you were you free; but since you are not free, be wise and take the advice that I gave you when last we met. Keep away from me; do your duty to your wife, and——"

"And, meanwhile you will marry some other man! No, thank you, Frances; that is not in my line at all. Besides, it is too late to talk of 'duty' to my wife. She hates me, and I hate her. Nothing keeps me to her side except appearances. If you were a less selfish woman, you would help me to cut the Gordian knot. It is the only way out of the difficulty, unless she should die; but that is too good to hope for."

Again that cold, strange shiver shook the woman's frame.

"Do not speak like that," she said. "You frighten me. It is so horrible, so cold-blooded, just as if you wished her to die. After all, she is the injured party, not you. Why did you marry? No one could have forced you. With me it was different. I was made to take Lord Leintworth; as for the Gordian knot, as you call it, your wife is too proud a woman to bring her wrongs before a public court. Besides, her best revenge would be to remain passive. No, no, Rashleigh, there is no help for us. Take my advice; let us part to-night. You grow too rash and importunate, indeed you do, and I have no desire to appear in society as Mrs. Ashburton's rival. It is not a rôle for which I have any taste."

"You are heartless," muttered the man savagely.

"No," she said, "I should be a happier

woman if I were. But I am young, rich, and free; and I value my liberty too well to imperil it for a doubtful benefit. Love makes one frail, and human, and short-sighted. You should be thankful that I can look beyond an hour like this for both our sakes. Ah! the waltz is over; come, let us leave this place. I feel as if there were something uncanny about it."

The stars still shone in calm, serene radiance. The breath of the night wind played above her brow, yet the consciousness of both seemed to Myra Ashburton as only the consciousness of a dream. She seemed near, and yet apart from herself, and with that feeling of severance came a strange, wild longing for freedom—for a more complete release from that sad and pain-filled personality which seemed herself, yet not herself.

Then a voice reached her, and, with a shuddering fear, she recognised its tones.

"You have heard. Are you satisfied now?"

Against her will—almost without her knowledge—her own voice answered back:

"I am satisfied."

"Will you still accept that poor pretence of husbandly fidelity? Is the intention of sin less guilty than the act?"

"Can I never win him back?" came some faint cry of longing—a longing that now had in it more of regret than pain, a longing that had turned with slow and lagging steps from the gates of disillusion.

"Never; for he has never loved you. Even if he tired of your rival, he would never return to you."

"And my presence breeds evil passions in his heart. I stand in his way to happiness. Yes, the morality of the world is but a cheat, a lie. . . . I am no true wife . . . he is no true husband. And this will be our life till death releases one or other. . . . Death"—she sighed faintly—"what is death?" she asked.

"There is no death," came the answer. "There is only change. Material form has a subtle essence which permeates it for all time—released from one shape, it takes another. Continuity is the universal law, only dimly recognised as yet. Mankind is scarce ripe for the great change. There is no real joy on earth; only the reflection, the shadow of what has yet to be revealed. The soul that reaches above self has a clearer sense of happiness, and a nearer approach to perfection, than it learns from any theology. Our good and evil deeds

react on ourselves, as on others. Hence your present suffering."

"And that suffering will continue?"

"I cannot read the future. I only judge of its probabilities by the light of the present."

"I can release him. . . . I can give him the freedom he desires."

"By the voluntary sacrifice of yourself, yes. But you would not give him happiness, only self-gratification. It is not in his nature to be faithful to anything higher, or purer, than sensual passion, and that, of all life's gifts, is the least able to content or satisfy the heart."

"Yet he has loved her for many years."

"He would not have loved her for one, had she been his wife."

"It is better that he should be free. My life but tempts him to deeper sin; I am like a black shadow on his path. There is murder in his eyes when they meet my own. So long as I live I keep him apart from what he deems happiness. Tell me, can I cut the cord of life without sin? . . . Where am I now? . . . Not in my body!"

A rushing sound, a confused noise and then light, light clear and distinct, and she seemed to herself to be looking down on herself, as from some clear and mystic height. Before her own motionless figure stood the scarlet-clad Mephistopheles.

His face looked pale and disturbed; his voice faint and tremulous, reached her ear. "Come back, come back. Footsteps are approaching . . . it is he—your husband—come back, or it will be too late."

Then—a sudden sense of rebellion—of an opposing force strong and swift as the current of a river to the swimmer, took possession of her. "I will not come back. He has prayed for freedom; let him take it as my life's last gift!"

"Come back. . . . Oh, come back for Heaven's sake!" The command seemed fainter, the power of resistance grew stronger.

"You have set me free. I will not return. What is life without hope, love, honour? And Death—I fear it not. Have you not said there is none? Its bitterness is past. What is more cruel than a broken faith?"

"Come back. Would you leave me with murder on my soul?"

A sound of voices, startled and confused, rang out on the soft night air; a crowd of

people on the flower-decked balcony; and stretched there white and still, a woman's form. Bending over her was a man, his grey face and ashen lips in strange contrast to his fantastic scarlet dress. "Water, bring water—she has fainted," he gasped.

A strong arm pushed him aside; a figure in the gay Court dress of the Royalist period stooped down and gazed at the closed eyes, the loosened hair, the lips about which still hovered a faint and happy smile.

"Good Heavens!" he cried, "this is death. She is cold and stiff already."

The crowd pushed him aside and fell aside like frightened sheep. Cries, murmurs, questions, tumult, and disorder reigned where a brief time before all had been merriment and delight.

Then slowly and reverently, beneath the summer stars, they bore that silent figure to its home, and still there seemed to hover that strange and happy smile upon the young, dead lips.

A HOUSE OF SHADOWS.

By C. L. PIRKIS.

"To my nephew, Arthur Archibald Gilbert, I bequeath my house, No. 32, Belgrave Street, Leeds, together with its contents."

So ran a clause of Aunt Margaret's will.

It was a puzzle to me that Aunt Margaret should take the trouble to bequeath anything to me. I had never been a favourite with her; in fact, I had seen next to nothing of her since my father's death, which had occurred about twelve years previously. My father had been one of the largest mill-owners and land-owners in the county. I was little more than a boy when I succeeded to his property. Since then everything had prospered with me. I had a head for business, and seemed born to good luck. If I betted on a horse, it was bound to win; if I purchased a piece of land, it grew to be double its value before the year was out. Little by little I had bought up the land for miles round: nearly the whole of Cottenham belonged to me now, also the presentation to the living of the parish church, and to that of the adjoining parish of St. James's.

"He is far too aggressively prosperous and self-satisfied for me to take any interest in him," Aunt Margaret had more than once said of me in my own

hearing. And on one occasion she had asserted, with an unpleasant emphasis, to a friend of mine who was singing my praises, "So long as husks fetch a better price than grain, Arthur will be worth something in the market."

Hence her legacy completely surprised me. The word "contents" also puzzled me. I had always understood that Aunt Margaret had furnished her house in Ayrshire with the "contents" of her house in Leeds when she had left that place about ten years ago. I began to suspect a hidden sarcasm in her bequest. Did she mean that I was welcome to the dust and cobwebs which, no doubt, by this time coated the walls and ceilings?

A day or two after I had had the news of Aunt Margaret's legacy, I received a letter from a big trading firm at Leeds—Messrs. Reid Brothers—offering me a thousand pounds down for the house as it stood. It was, they stated, thoroughly out of repair through being so long unoccupied—ten or more years—and they imagined that I should have some difficulty in finding a tenant for it, as it bore an ill name in the neighbourhood. It suited them, however, to make this offer, as the house adjoined their warehousing yard, and they wished to pull it down to make way for storehouses they were desirous of building.

Here was my good luck again! However sinister Aunt Margaret's intentions toward me might have been, here was Fortune stepping in to frustrate them. A thousand pounds down for a house in a hopeless state of dilapidation! It was too good an offer to be slighted, so I wrote by return post accepting it, and expressing my intention of running over to Leeds to take my survey of the "contents" of the old place in the following week, when I hoped that they would have the deed of sale ready for my signature.

Then I thought I would stroll down to the Rectory to talk the matter over with Mildred Garnett, the Rector's daughter.

Mildred and I were engaged to be married. She was the only girl in Cottenham who had given me to understand that she was not to be had for the asking, and so, forsooth, she was the only girl in Cottenham whom I cared to marry.

She was tall and fair, large-eyed and stately. Little Rosie Hope, Sir Spencer Hope's only daughter, dark-eyed, and full of fun, much more nearly fulfilled my conception of female loveliness; but Rosie had fallen such an easy captive in

our very first flirtation, that I had speedily thrown her over for the fair Mildred.

Mildred was as cold as an icicle to me. Left to herself she would have given an unqualified "No" to my offer of marriage. I had been too wary, however, to go to her in the first instance. I went to her father instead. I was what North-country people call "good at a bargain," that is to say, I had a keen eye for my own interest. I knew that it was very much to my own interest in this matter to speak to the father first. He was over eighty years of age, he had no private means of any sort, but rejoiced in the possession of an invalid wife, eight daughters, and a weakly son studying for the Church, who was hoping some day, by my favour, to step into his father's shoes. I dare say a good deal of pressure was put upon Mildred to make her say "Yes" to my proposal, for her eyes were very red and her voice as solemn as a funeral bell, when she put her hand in mine, and promised to be my wife. But what did red eyes and a solemn voice matter to me? I had my own way, and I meant to enjoy it.

When I got down to the Rectory I was met by the intimation that the young ladies were at the church, decorating it for Easter. To the church I accordingly bent my steps, and there found the seven sisters, in seven different gymnastic attitudes, wreathing pillars and arches, and Mildred and Rosie Hope at their work together in the chancel. Mildred was filling one of the broad window ledges with a bank of wet moss; Rosie was on her knees, sorting out primroses which were to be planted in the bank. They must have spent hours getting those primroses, for Easter was early that year and field flowers were scarce. I saw Rosie flush scarlet, and her hands tremble as I went up the aisle towards them. Mildred turned a shade paler, but went on steadily shaking out her wet mosses.

"Why didn't you ask me for flowers? I would have sent you azaleas and ferns to hide that ugly ledge," I said as I shook hands with the girls, "it would have saved you worlds of trouble."

"Easter gifts should be offered, not asked for," said Mildred in her usual stately fashion; "and this is not trouble, but pleasure."

Mildred had a nasty way of seeing things from her own point of view, not mine. I saw the frame of mind she was in, and turned on my heel and left the church.

Offered, indeed! Why, I spent over eight hundred a year on my green-houses; and, if my azaleas and ferns were not worth asking for, I assuredly should not "offer" them to be baked alive in that overlighted, overheated church.

So I did not take Mildred into my confidence concerning the handsome offer I had had for Aunt Margaret's dilapidated old house; nor about something else which had come to me in the shape of news that morning, namely, that the living of Saint James's, in the next parish, had suddenly become vacant by the death of its incumbent, and was consequently at my disposal.

On my way home, Sir Spencer Hope overtook me.

"We're off to Mentone next week," he said as he shook hands cordially. "Rosie has suddenly discovered that Cottenham doesn't suit her. She has been looking a little pulled down lately. Have you noticed it?"

Now I knew perfectly well that Sir Spencer would not have shaken me so cordially by the hand had he known the little game of fast and loose I had played with Rosie. But I knew that Rosie was far too plucky to confirm with her tongue the tale which her pale cheeks told. I expressed my regret at losing a neighbour for an indefinite period; then I turned the conversation by alluding to the vacant living. What a nuisance it was that the man had died in this hurried fashion, giving me no time to look out for his successor!

"Give it to Lytham," said Sir Spencer. "He's an all-round good fellow."

Christopher Lytham was the hard-worked, underpaid Curate of our parish church, and, if the truth be told, not a particular favourite of mine. Off and on, people had talked a good deal of nonsense about that man. They had even been idiotic enough to say that Mildred was in love with him—had been so for years, in fact—and would have married him if he had been in a position to make her an offer. I scouted the idea. I would not acknowledge Lytham for a rival—a man over fifty years of age, and worn to a shadow almost with hard work and poor fare. If ever a man stood in his own light it was that man! Once, the biggest magnate in our county—an Earl with fifteen livings in his gift—came by a sudden freak to our parish church. Now, ten out of those fifteen livings were held by men over seventy years of age. Lytham had to

preach that morning. He knew well enough who was among his audience, and what a parsimonious old fellow that Earl was. What did he do but take for his text, "Woe unto you that are rich," and, looking the Earl straight in his face, delivered a tirade against wealthy land-owners, whose hands were outstretched to receive rather than to give.

Well, I had not fifteen livings in my gift; but I had one just vacant, and an uncommonly good one too. And he knew it! Yet, on the following Sunday, he actually gets into the pulpit and makes me the target for his bullets, just as once before he had made the Earl.

It was Easter Sunday, too. The church was filled with April sunshine, and bright with its wreaths and greenery. Everything that morning seemed at its youngest, freshest, and best. Ten minutes' talk about something cheerful would have sent us all home satisfied with Lytham, and with ourselves into the bargain. Yet what does that man do but thunder out to us in his most denunciatory manner a sermon better suited to a memorial service in a mausoleum, than to a parish church on an Easter Day. I did not hear the first half of it. Rosie Hope sat immediately in front of me, and her long thick plait of brown hair, tied with brown ribbon, hung over the back of her pew, and, resting on my prayer-book, started a curious train of thought. A shaft of light fell through the high window on to it, and found out its every thread of russet gold. It looked so pretty that I felt I should like to kiss it, and I could not help contrasting it with Mildred's flaxen coils, which seemed to tell a tale of slower-beating pulses and a colder heart.

Suddenly and sharply the Curate's voice fell across my train of thought, bringing it to a halt.

"Supposing," he was saying, "that for one five minutes the power of seeing material objects was withdrawn from our eyes, and in its stead we were given the power to see only the spiritual, what would be the result? I, standing here in my pulpit, looking down on this congregation, might, I fear, see here and there in your pews some dismally empty places. The material gone, there might be nothing spiritual for my spiritual eye to discern. But even worse than empty places might, in some cases, confront me, I fear"—and this was where his discourse became so brutally personal—"there are some before me, at this moment, in the height of their youth, strength,

beauty, wealth—this, my eye that discerns material things can see; but were an eye that could only discern spiritual things given to me, what should I see in the place of these material attributes? As I now stand, looking down on you, I should see your handsome faces dying like breath into the air, your stalwart frames fading like shadows into the blue-black of night, and in their stead would solidify before my eyes your selfishness, your worldliness, your love of pleasure and of gold, till in bodily form I should see before me a shape, decrepit, deformed, and hideous."

He said a great deal more to the same purpose, and sat, down at length, looking white and thoroughly worn out.

I walked home with Mildred to the Rectory gate.

"That man is intolerable," I said, as we left the church. "Your father should speak to him."

"What man?" asked Mildred, absently.

"What man? Why, Lytham, of course. I never heard wilder rant in my life."

"It was all true, from beginning to end."

I had to bite my lip to keep my temper. We walked on for twenty yards in silence, but I could not make up my mind to let the Curate go. At him again I went.

"If he had known how to preach a decent sermon," I said in a loud, domineering tone, "he might have gone out of the church the Incumbent of St. James's."

Mildred did not open her lips, but she turned and gave me one look that said far more than her tongue could have said.

"As it is," I went on loftily, "I shall leave the presentation in the hands of the Bishop, and no doubt he will give the living to his private chaplain; he is on the look-out for preferment for him."

Mildred walked on faster than ever, and did not even turn her head towards me now. I determined to make her speak.

"There's one comfort," I said maliciously, "the man won't be here long to preach his idiotic sermons. He's wearing himself to skin and bone with his hard work, and a man of fifty can't keep up that sort of thing long."

"At fifty a man is in his prime," said Mildred shortly, without turning her head.

We had got ahead of the congregation now, and were walking at a rapid pace across the fields which led to the Rectory garden gate.

"Some men may be in their prime at fifty," I answered scornfully, "but not this

man! His eyes are sunk into his head with study."

"He has beautiful eyes," interrupted Mildred incisively.

"They're not much good to him, then, in spite of their beauty. He is as blind as a bat without his glasses, and his hair is nearly as grey as your father's."

"I have not noticed his greyiness."

"His hand shook like an old man's when he turned his pages over."

"I didn't see it."

"He had to hold on by the hand-rail to get himself down from the pulpit."

"I didn't see that, either."

We had crossed the last of the fields now, and were standing at the Rectory garden gate. Here Mildred paused.

"What, in Heaven's name, did you see?" I asked, my temper utterly gone now.

Mildred had her answer ready.

"I can tell you what I should have seen," she answered, her voice vibrating, her colour mounting, "if for one moment the eye to see spiritual things, of which he spoke, had been vouchsafed to me—a Sir Galahad with his lance uplifted, or a Saint Michael with his sword drawn, ready to defend the right and overthrow the wrong."

She did not hold out her hand to say good-bye as she finished speaking, but turned and went into the house, leaving me standing there looking after her.

It was no wonder that I strode home as if I had been shod with seven-leagued boots, disregarding the rustic bows and curtsies of the respectful villagers.

That thin-visaged man of fifty, with his two-hundred-a-year curacy, to pose as a Sir Galahad or a Saint Michael, and to play the rival to me with my acres and thousands, my youth and good looks! The idea would have been ludicrous if it had not been brought home to me in such an unpleasantly personal fashion by Mildred's vigorous championship of the man.

But though I was furious with Mildred for her absurd idealisation of a commonplace individual, I had not the slightest intention of allowing our difference of opinion to widen into a positive estrangement. No, I was resolved to keep her to her bargain. I was rich enough and influential enough to choose whom I would for my wife. I had chosen her, and my wife she should be. I knew that she was too strictly honourable to break her given promise and throw me over. Besides, let alone honour and right-mindedness, what would become

of the invalid mother and seven sisters supposing that the father died and the brother were not allowed to step into his shoes? That thought to her mind must have settled the question at once.

I started the next day for Leeds to survey the contents of Aunt Margaret's house, in no very amiable frame of mind. The sermon of the previous day, it is true, had entirely faded from my memory, but the unpleasant individuality of the preacher, as limned by Mildred, was not so easy to get rid of. The man seemed to take his place beside me as I seated myself in the railway carriage, and he travelled with me every yard of the sixty miles which lay between Cottenham and Leeds. He seemed to step forth with me into the busy streets of the smoky city, and to haunt me to the very doorstep of the office of Messrs. Reid Brothers.

"A man worn to fiddle-strings with hard work and poor living! He a Sir Galahad!" I muttered ill-temperedly.

A younger member of the firm received me. He laid before me the document transferring the property, which awaited my signature. I signed it in the presence of witnesses, and gave directions as to the payment of the purchase-money to my banking account. Then I asked a question or two respecting the ill-name of the house: What had made him think that I might have some difficulty in finding a tenant for it?

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"It stands to reason," he said, "that a house that has been unlet for more than ten years, cannot be a very attractive tenement. Did Miss Gilbert never give her reasons for leaving it?"

"No; she was absolutely silent on the matter. After she had taken up her abode in Scotland her friends in England saw little or nothing of her."

"It all happened so long ago," the young man went on to say, "and the story has come to me in mere outline; and even that I can't vouch for. Miss Gilbert had a little adopted daughter, to whom she was devotedly attached, I believe. Well, one day, so I have been told, this little girl came running to her crying: 'Oh, auntie'—so she called Miss Gilbert—'I've seen the shadow of a child-angel on the drawing-room wall.' Soon after this the child died, and Miss Gilbert broke up her establishment and settled in Ayrshire."

"Who had the house before my aunt took it?"

The young man shook his head.

"I haven't the remotest idea. I believe it had been empty for nearly a generation. Some people say that it was built a couple of hundred years ago by an astrologer, or alchemist, who practised medicine on principles of his own, and that he was murdered in his own house for a wizard by his servant. But I dare say this story has been fitted on to the house because it seemed to suit it. Perhaps the old lady, who has the keys of the house, may be able to tell you something definite. She was at one time Miss Gilbert's housekeeper, and helped to nurse the little adopted daughter in her last illness."

It was evidently of no use to question the young man further, so, after ascertaining the address of the old lady who had possession of the keys, I took my departure, promising that so soon as I had made my survey of the interior of the house, I would hand over the keys to his firm.

I went direct to the house where Aunt Margaret's old housekeeper lived. She was a quaint-looking, little old lady, thin, nearly blind, and all but stone-deaf. She sat close to a blazing fire, wrapped in a thick white shawl, and shook her head, and muttered to herself a good deal as she held out the keys to me.

"So you're going to unlock the House of Shadows?" she said. "Better let it alone—better let it alone."

"The House of Shadows!" The name had a weird sound, and suggested a story worth hearing. It aroused my curiosity. I began almost to regret my haste in disposing of Aunt Margaret's legacy.

"There are some lying in their graves who could have told you strange stories of that house," she began, then broke off abruptly, and, rocking herself to and fro, she muttered once more, "better let it alone, better let it alone."

I shouted into her ear that I should be infinitely obliged to her if she would tell me all she knew about the house, and what she herself had seen in it.

"What I have seen I have seen," she answered. "Better leave it alone, better leave it alone."

Then she pursed her lips, and shrank into her chimney-corner once more.

Again and again I tried to induce her to speak, but without success. Never a syllable could I get out of her save the repetition of the ominous words: "better leave it alone."

It was tantalising to the last degree, but there was no help for it. I jingled the rusty keys impatiently together, and set off for the old house.

Belgrave Street was a busy thoroughfare situated in a quarter of the town where gentlemen's houses, one by one, had been given up to the ever-encroaching necessities of trade. Number thirty-two was the only house in the street that did not boast of a plate-glass front devoted to the exhibition of tradesmen's wares. It was a detached corner house, with a mere apology for a garden running round it, four storeys in height, square-built, and solid-looking. Every one of its windows owned to heavy wooden outside shutters, which were closely shut. The door presented a sadly blistered, weather-beaten front. The steps and narrow strip of garden were piled with the dust and rubbish which an east wind sweeps into every vacant corner of a busy street.

Thus it stood, an oasis of silence in the jostling, bustling thoroughfare. It recalled to my mind those closed, forgotten churchyards one comes upon sometimes in the heart of London, and which strike such uncouth notes of contrast with the clattering, chattering crowd on the pavement outside. If these would but be silent for five minutes! If those could but speak!

But though I stood for a moment sentimentalising as I looked up at the old house, I was not at all in the frame of mind to receive messenger or message even from the dead. Curiosity was my mood of the moment. Now, what were the "contents" of this apparently empty house which Aunt Margaret had seen fit to bequeath to me?

Daylight ended sooner here in this overbuilt city than it did in breezy Cottenham. I looked at my watch, and was startled to find how the hours had slipped away. The hands pointed to six. The train by which I had decided to return started at a quarter-past seven, and I had promised Messrs. Reid that I would hand over the keys to them before taking my departure.

It occurred to me that I should save time if, instead of endeavouring, unassisted, to open those shutters whose bars and bolts must be rusty through long disuse, I procured from one of the neighbouring shops a lamp or lantern wherewith to make my survey of possible emptiness.

A lamp shop stood a little lower down the street. There I accordingly purchased

a small portable kerosene lamp, first carefully ascertaining that it was in thoroughly good working trim.

The key creaked in the lock, the old door groaned as it swung back on its hinges, a rush of foul, mildewed, dust-laden air swept past me. It was like standing at the mouth of a subterranean vault. It did not seem as if I were letting in light and fresh air, but rather letting out imprisoned darkness and foul air—the latter seemed so much the stronger force of the two.

I should have infinitely preferred leaving the front door open as well for the supply of a purer atmosphere as for the light it afforded. This, however, it was impossible in such a bustling thoroughfare to do; a fact which the scrambling and exclamations of the half-dozen streetlings clambering on the outer railings speedily brought home to me.

So I closed the door behind me, then lifting my lamp high above my head I took a long, steady survey of my surroundings.

Nothing but damp, dismal emptiness greeted my eyes on every side. The entrance-hall in which I stood, was large and lofty for the size of the house, two doors opened from it on either side. Each of those four doors stood open. In turns I passed through each, only to get a repetition of the bare floors, bare walls, and ceilings hung with cobwebs which had greeted me in the vestibule.

My suspicions of the hidden sarcasm of Aunt Margaret's bequest grew upon me. Not so much as a brass picture-rod or forgotten letter-rack met my eye. It was emptiness—emptiness everywhere.

It would have been pitch-dark also, so closely shuttered were the windows, if it had not been for the strong light of my kerosene lamp. I congratulated myself on my forethought in providing myself with it. Fancy the loss of time involved in forcing open those shutters just to see—nothing at all. I resolved upon taking a hasty survey of the upper rooms, which no doubt would present much such a picture as these below stairs; then I would toss the keys over to Messrs. Reid, and congratulate myself on having made the best of a bad bargain.

At the farther end of the hall were two flights of stairs, one leading up, the other down to the kitchen quarters. I decided upon leaving the lower part of the house unvisited; there could be nothing in the shape of "contents" there to interest me. "Now to wake up the echoes of the empty rooms above," I said to myself.

I set my foot on the first stair of the upper flight.

Then commenced a chapter of the most curious experiences which ever living man went through. It began in sensation, it ended in fact. As I set foot on the first of that flight of stairs an indefinite feeling took possession of me, which if put into words would have run somewhat thus: "Here am I step by step leaving behind me the material and advancing towards the spiritual." It was the sort of feeling a man might be supposed to have, when, lying on his death-bed, he sees stretching before him the darkness of the unknown land he must soon enter. This feeling grew upon me with every upward step I took.

That staircase seemed to me a bridge between two worlds, one of which I was leaving, one of which I was entering.

It was a bridge, too, that seemed to span a great sea of darkness which came surging up from below to the very rail where my hand rested. Behind me the hall and lower rooms receded into dense shadow, before me the staircase seemed to wind away into impenetrable gloom.

Something else beside the darkness made itself felt as I mounted the stairs—the silence, utter, intense. One might almost have called it material in its completeness. It seemed to fill the house, as ether fills the sky, and in it the sense of its emptiness was lost. I had said as I had looked at my iron-heeled boots and the carpetless stairs, and had thought of my eleven-stone weight, "Now I shall rouse a thousand echoes with every step I take," and lo! not a single echo awakened. My tread seemed to fall as lightly as that of a beetle or cricket. It gave me a queer sensation. My personality seemed little by little to be dwindling. Yet withal, in spite of the denseness of that silence, there came to me a curious feeling such as one gets sometimes in a London fog—when one hears the sound of footsteps behind one and can see nothing—the sensation of being followed. Certainly there was no sound of footfall here to give rise to the feeling, yet, all the same, I had it. I felt as if some thing were following close on my heels, and in another moment would lay its hand on my shoulder. I paused instinctively, holding my lamp high above my head, and standing with my back to the wall as if to allow that some one or thing to pass.

The light from my lamp flowed down

over balustrade and staircase. There was the solid square of darkness which represented the hall, there were the white stairs, as it were, creeping out of it to where I stood half-way up the staircase. There too was my own dark shadow stretching up the stairs to my very feet.

But stay! Was it my shadow? I put my hand to my eyes, I lowered my lamp, I lifted my lamp. With my lamp held thus ought my shadow to lie in this way athwart the stairs? Should it not by rights have darkened the bare surface of the wall ahead of me instead of lying thus at my feet, in a way all its own? It seemed as if its position could only be accounted for by the supposition that some one else was holding a light—a stronger light than mine—and throwing my shadow at a fantastic angle. I grew bewildered and dizzy, my eyes did not seem to be doing their work. My own shadow seemed to grow more real, more solid than I. It rounded, it deepened, it seemed to take more space on the stairs than I dared to occupy. I shrank close and closer to the wall. Now it seemed to near me, it seemed to pass me, it seemed to mount the stairs in front of me, it seemed to stand as a dark solid shape at a door which faced the head of the stairs. Great Heaven, it seemed to disappear through the door!

Then I drew a long breath, and got my wits together as well as I could.

"It's all an optical delusion," I said to myself. "You fool! If you were to open the shutters and let in daylight, you would soon get to the bottom of it all. There is some trickery here. A hole in one of the shutters, a magic lantern or Pepper's ghost arrangement in one of the windows of the overlooking houses, and the whole thing stands explained."

Here, I am sorry to say, an altogether unwarrantable suspicion of the honest dealing of the Messrs. Reid crossed my brain. They evidently had wanted the house; they possibly had coined the story of the child-angel's shadow, and, to keep up the fiction, were employing some secret apparatus to mystify me. Well, there was the room—the drawing-room no doubt of the house where the scene of the little girl's marvellous experience was supposed to be laid. I could ascertain for myself what scope or possibility for jugglery of any sort its four walls afforded. As for Aunt Margaret's sinister intentions, I had forgotten all about them. My one aim and

desire now was to lift the veil of this mystery which seemed to surround me.

I raised the glass of my little lamp to ascertain that it was in perfect working trim; then I mounted the few remaining stairs which divided me from the drawing-room door.

As before, the noiselessness of my own footsteps appalled me, once more my own bodily personality seemed to be dwindling. Making a great effort, I turned the handle of the door that faced me and, resolved to break what seemed to me an imaginary spell, I shouted at the top of my voice:

"Is anyone here?"

Or, fancied I did. For though I was straining my lungs to the utmost, voice I had none. It had died upon my lips, as it sometimes does in an agonised dream.

I almost staggered into the darkness which the opened door laid bare to me. It was desolately empty, like the rooms below. The walls were dust-laden and discoloured by age, here and there paler squares on the paint showing where pictures had once hung. All this I saw at one glance, as likewise the fact that over one mantel-piece yet remained a large chimney-glass. There could be no doubt that my nerves were unstrung now. My hands seemed palsied; I could scarcely hold my lamp. I stumbled across the room somehow and deposited it on the mantel-piece, steadying myself for one moment against the white marble. As I did so, my eyes lifted involuntarily to the mirror above it. But was it a mirror? I asked myself vaguely, bewilderingly. If so, where was I in it? I could not see myself. No reflection of a stalwart, broad-shouldered young fellow fell across the damp, dusty square of glass. There was the bare discoloured wall; there was the mist of emptiness stretching in front of it; but where my likeness should have looked out at me, there was only a blank space. I was nowhere. I gazed and gazed. Once more it seemed to me that my eyes were not doing their work.

Not doing their work, did I say? The next moment it seemed to me that they were doing more than their work, as, strangely fascinated, yet repelled, they rested upon a black, solid-looking shadow which darkened the blank wall that was so faithfully mirrored in the glass before me.

That might have been the wall on which the little child had seen the child-angel's shadow; but it was no child-angel's shadow

which darkened its discoloured panels now.

Here words fail me altogether.

How to describe in human language that dark shape, I know not. I call it shape, for lack of a better word; yet, at first sight, shape it had none. It was just a formless blot on the bare wall—a heaped-up shadow of something. But as I gazed, with eyes that shrank from, yet dared not cease seeing, the thing seemed to take to itself form. It broadened, it heightened, it thickened. A lump of clay, was it? Yet it had arms, legs, and something of a head, though destitute of neck or shoulders. I could almost have fancied it the shadow cast by something outside the pale of humanity.

I strove once more to rally my senses.

"It's a Pepper's Ghost arrangement," I repeated stolidly, stupidly, as a drunken man at times keeps reiterating some formula of words which have altogether lost their meaning for him.

And even as I said the words the black mass of hideousness began to move. It dropped from a perpendicular to a horizontal position. Its motion was that of a snake, it moved as if propelled by ribs; it crept, it grovelled, it wriggled. Yet withal, its likeness to the human form was appalling.

A sickening sense of horror took possession of me. Had my senses left me? From the time that I had entered the house I had felt my personality dwindling; my feet had been powerless to call forth echoes out of the emptiness; I had shrunk into nothing before my own shadow; and now I looked in vain for myself in the mirror that fronted me. Had I in very truth crossed the borderland between life and death? Was that hideous, grovelling form one of the creatures that peopled the world into which my feet had just stumbled?

A sudden thought flashed into my brain.

"If its shape be so fearful, what must its face be?" My thought ended in a prayer "that I may be spared the sight of so awful a presentment."

But even as I uttered the words they were cast back in my teeth. The shapeless distorted thing, for one instant ceasing its sinuous, creeping movement, showed less like a shadow than a picture on the blank wall. Colour, light, and shade seemed to spread athwart it. A face for one moment looked out at me from the hideous outline. Great Heavens! It was my own!

After this all became a blank to me. I fell senseless on the floor.

I got back my senses in the room of an hotel at the farther end of the street. Thither I had been carried by the orders of young Mr. Reid who, surprised at my non-return with the promised keys, had sent in search of me. The man he had despatched, seeing a light shining in the upper floor of number thirty-two, had knocked and rung repeatedly at the front door. Getting no reply, he had concluded either that sudden illness had seized me, or that some foul play had been perpetrated. He had, therefore, called the police to his aid, the door had been broken in, and I had been found lying unconscious on the floor. All this was told to me afterwards, together with the news that within twenty-four hours after I had been carried from the house Messrs. Reid Brothers had commenced the work of its destruction, and that within a week from that day, not one stone of the old building remained upon another.

I stayed at the hotel during that week, languid, and incapable of exertion, the outer world all but a blank to me. But though I lay inert, silent, and with closed eyes, my brain was anything but a blank. It seemed as if the picture of that hideous, distorted shadow had been graven into it. A great sense of awe had taken possession of me. I felt as one might feel who for one moment had had the veil of his humanity swept away by a strong hand, and his real individuality revealed to him.

To no living soul did I ever speak a word of my experiences in the House of Shadows. Where would have been the use? They would no doubt have solved the mystery by saying that I had been strongly impressed by a sermon I had heard. I had probably tripped and fallen as I entered that upper room, and, as I lay seemingly unconscious on the floor, my brain had weaved a tissue of fantastic experiences. Well, I could not have proved their theory incorrect, so I held my tongue on the matter. But, all the same, I could not help thinking that Aunt Margaret knew very well what she was about when she bequeathed to me the "contents" of her house at Leeds.

I think Mildred must have seen a strange story written on my face, for, on the first day that I went to see her after I got back to Cottenham, she stared and stared at me as if she had never seen me before. Yet she seemed to understand all in a moment what I wished to say when I began to hint

in an awkward, clumsy fashion that, after all, I thought our engagement was a mistake, and I imagined that we should both like to be released from it.

She finished all my sentences for me that morning. I had no sooner begun to tell her that I thought I had found a suitable man for the living of St. James's, than she said right out:

"Christopher Lytham, of course."

But she flushed a rosy red as she said it, as if the possibility of Lytham becoming the Incumbent of St. James's suggested another possibility equally pleasant, but more personal.

And then she stared at me again so long and steadily that I think she felt an apology was due to me, for she began, in a confused, hesitating way to say that she somehow felt as if I were a stranger to her, and that she had never seen my face before.

And Mildred was right. The man at whom she was then looking she never had seen before.

Rosie Hope's visit to Mentone was deferred until six months later, when she and I spent our honeymoon there.

BOTH SIDES OF THE STORY.

By C. G. FURLEY.

CHAPTER I.

I KNOW it is not safe to make friends in boarding-houses, but Mrs. Lockhart was not by any means the conventional fascinating woman who turns out to be an adventuress; nor am I the sort of being an adventuress cares to entrap. In the first place, I am a woman; and my thirty years have not only taught me a little wisdom of the sadder kind, but have made me indifferent to stray acquaintances. But I felt strangely drawn to this sad-eyed, elderly lady, whose mourning garb was no mere conventional sign of grief; her face proved that.

I was sad myself just then. I had not the right to dress in black or to withdraw from my little world and its interests because Charlie Manson's life—such a sad failure of a life!—had come to an end. But it is hard to keep up a semblance of cheerfulness when one's heart is sore; duty is sometimes too hard for mortal creatures; and I was grateful to our shrewd old doctor when he, of his own accord, told my father that I was not in good health—"Nothing constitutional; but Miss Muriel is below

par, and a change will do her good," he said—and recommended my going to St. Leonards for a month or so.

My father asked me, in surprise:

"Do you really want a change, Muriel? You aren't ill," and seemed surprised when I said "yes"; but then papa allows for no illness that is not a fever or rheumatism, and never suspected that the brief announcement in our county paper of the death of my old-time lover could affect me. Had he not told me, six years ago—when, as he put it, "that scamp Manson jilted you for the sake of a girl with money," to put all thought of Charlie out of my life! As if I could! But then, papa did not know the whole truth, and would not have believed how Charlie's people worried and bullied him into giving me up; and I had never told him of that last interview I had with him.

It was an accidental one; neither of us would then have sought the other, for he was married by this time to that other girl whose very name was unknown to me, and whom I yet hated so bitterly. May my bitter feelings be forgiven me! Alas! Charlie Manson's wife was a fitter object for pity than for either hate or envy.

I had driven into Barnston to do some shopping, when I met him in the street; and I was so surprised—for I thought he was in another county, and would never come to Foxshire again—that involuntarily I stopped. His face flushed when he saw me, and he hesitated for a moment; then hurried forward, exclaiming:

"Speak to me, Muriel; I know I don't deserve it, and I would never have put myself in your way; but, now that we have met, say that you forgive me."

"Yes, I forgive you," I replied, rather bitterly, I fear; "but you don't look very happy."

I had no right to add this, of course; but I could not help it.

"Happy!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I expected happiness? I told my father that if I gave in to his wishes he must take the risk of ruining my life. He said he would, and he will see, before long, that he has done it. Oh, Muriel, why didn't you stick to me?"

"It was not I who was faithless," I answered coldly.

"I know that, but you should have helped me to defy my people; you shouldn't have let me go. You were always stronger than I, but when I needed your help most you would not lift a finger to interfere."

I was silent. Yes, Charlie was weak. I had always known it, and had, somehow, loved him the better for it; but a woman cannot match her strength against her lover's weakness in order to keep him faithful to her. Both pride and womanly feeling had made me stand aside, and let him fight the matter out as best he could; there was my father's command, too, to do nothing to secure a husband whose family did not think me good enough, or rich enough, for him; but I didn't need that. I had said to Charlie, "Do what you like," when he wanted me to say "be true to me," and the end was that he was faithless and—miserable.

I knew that by his look, even without the words he uttered when I did not answer his last remark: "This will be the ruin of me. I don't care a straw, though I go to the devil."

"Don't say that, Charlie!" I cried. "At least, do right now. Lead an honourable and manly life."

"I would have done it for your sake," he said with a touch of sullenness.

"Do it for right's sake, for your own sake—for your wife's sake," I answered.

"And for yours?"

"You have reasons enough without thinking of me; and I have no longer any place in your life."

"Ah! then—— But, Heaven bless you, Muriel; you deserved a better man than I could ever have been. I wish, for your sake, that you had never seen me; but, since things are as they are, forget me as soon as you can." And with that he strode away, without even touching my hand.

These were the last words we ever exchanged. I heard, two years afterwards, through a bit of chance gossip, that his marriage had turned out very unhappily. His wife had gone home to her family, while he went to Australia. Then, at the end of six years, I saw the announcement of his death; and, having kept a brave countenance through all my trouble, I broke down at last, and so went away to St. Leonards for a month—a blessed month, when I could be as sad as I chose without anyone to demand, "why on earth is Murrie so mopy?" as the boys were wont to do at home.

There I met Mrs. Lockhart. She was sad, too, and far from strong. I was convinced that it was grief that was killing her. That is one of the advantages sixty has over thirty—that death is so much more attainable. It was her unhappiness

that drew me to her, and somehow we became such friends that one day, when we were sitting in one of those glass houses that stud the esplanade at Hastings, she told me what was the cause of her sorrow. It was strange that she should confide it to a stranger; but I think the weight of it was too heavy, and, as she told me, she never spoke of it to her husband because his unhappiness was as great as hers.

Her husband was the tenant of Lord Braithwaite's largest farm. Between him and his landlord there was something more than the conventional intercourse between landlord and tenant; for the Lockharts had been at the Manor Farm for almost as many generations as the Braithwaites had been at the Hall, and the two men had been friends as boys. Then Lady Braithwaite liked Mrs. Lockhart, who was, indeed, an educated and perfectly refined woman, and, having no child of her own, had always made much of little Nellie Lockhart, the tenant's only daughter. She had always had Nellie a great deal at the Hall when Lord Braithwaite came down there in the autumn, and it never struck her that there was any reason for neglecting her in the fact that the girl had grown to be eighteen, and was very pretty. Some of her guests thought that it was very stupid, and, indeed, indecorous to show such regard to a farmer's wife and daughter; but, as you cannot express to your hostess your disapproval of her conduct, Lady Braithwaite was allowed to do as she liked.

One September the guests at the Hall included one Harry Lethbridge, Sir Robert Lethbridge's second son, who, having no taste for any of the professions, which younger sons are, by conventional propriety, allowed to adopt, was to be made a farmer. At least, so he said; and it was on this pretext that he made acquaintance with Mr. Lockhart. He managed to be about the farm a good deal when Lord Braithwaite's other guests were out among the partridges, and his visits always ended in his going in to lunch or tea with the Lockharts. He was a quiet, rather shy young man, in whose manner there was no suggestion of any consciousness of superiority in either birth or breeding; indeed, in his manner to the farmer, there was an anxious deference which would have amused some of his friends. Mr. Lockhart took it quite seriously; but his wife, who had the subtle humour one often finds in women who have led a quiet life, and exercised quick perceptions on little things, who had, too,

more regard for social grades than her husband, observed it with mingled amusement and surprise. Then she began to wonder a little at the young man's manner, when suddenly a blush on her daughter's cheek explained all.

After this she became cold towards Mr. Lethbridge; her husband, to whom she confided her ideas, became more than cold—doing the thing with masculine thoroughness, he became absolutely rude.

Preventive measures, taken too late, are apt to bring on the crisis they are adopted to avoid. Harry Lethbridge was puzzled by the sudden change in the Lockharts' demeanour, and within a day or two, when returning from an obviously undesired visit to the farm in a very depressed state—for Nellie had not appeared at all—he met her sauntering along a lane, apparently as unhappy as himself. He stopped to speak to her, but found her nervous and taciturn, as unlike as possible to her usual frank and gentle self.

"Are you angry with me, Miss Lockhart?" he asked, after one or two ineffectual attempts to begin a conversation.

"Angry? No, of course not," she replied, trying as she spoke to pass him on her homeward way.

"Then why won't you speak to me? I have just been at the farm, and your father and mother were just the same as you—wouldn't have a word to say to me. What has changed you all so suddenly?"

Nellie, conscious that she had been told to avoid Mr. Lethbridge as much as possible, and not daring to explain this to him, held down her head to conceal the rising tears.

"It is hard," he went on. "I don't know what I have done to offend you. I wouldn't displease you for the world. You believe that, don't you?"

"Yes; but——"

The tears had come by this time, and a sob choked Nellie's voice.

"But what? Why are you crying, Miss Lockhart? Nellie, don't you know that I can't bear to see you troubled? Don't you know that I love you?"

So the end of Mrs. Lockhart's foresight, and Mr. Lockhart's coolness, was that Nellie went home to whisper to her mother, between her blushes, that Harry Lethbridge loved her. The parents were left more troubled than before, and more helpless; Mr. Lockhart's declaration that he would knock young Lethbridge down if he approached the farm being rather

impotent as a remedial measure. The trouble of uncertainty, however, was soon removed. That evening one of the Hall servants brought a note from Mr. Lethbridge to Nellie's father, asking for a private interview, and the request being granted, he offered himself as a husband for her.

This might have been considered satisfactory enough; but Mr. Lockhart did not feel it to be so. He was as proud in his fashion as any man could be; but it was not a pride that made him feel flattered at having a baronet's son for his daughter's suitor.

"I had rather she married a man of her own class," he told Harry. "I don't want my girl to leave the rank she was born in."

"She is fit for any rank," said the lover fervently.

"Maybe. I think she is, myself. But I am her father, and you are her lover, and our word won't be taken for it. Besides, we know her; but to those who don't, she is only a farmer's daughter, and you will be said to have married beneath you if you make her your wife."

"Well, I don't care for that."

"But I do," said Mr. Lockhart.

"And you aren't like the average farmer," Harry went on. "Lord Braithwaite says he considers you one of his best friends; and Lady Braithwaite thinks no end of Mrs. Lockhart and Nellie."

"That is true; but I have always been determined that my wife and I must justify their friendship by making no base use of it; above all, I wouldn't be guilty of the snobbery of thinking that it made any difference in our respective conditions. We are friends. But he is my landlord, and I am a tenant-farmer; I neither want to be, nor to be thought, anything else. And if you ask your father about the matter, he will be the first to say that my daughter isn't a fitting match for his son."

"But when I explain your exceptional position to him——"

"If Nellie isn't good enough for any man as her father's daughter, she shan't be made passable by being described as a hanger-on of Lord and Lady Braithwaite's."

"But she isn't. And you surely don't mean to refuse her to me because other people don't know that she is ever so much too good for me."

"We have got to consider other people in this world."

"I think, Mr. Lockhart," said the young,

man firmly, "that you should consider Nellie and me first. I don't think a lot of myself, but I can honestly say that I would be a good and loyal husband to Nellie, and—she loves me."

"But your family, Mr. Lethbridge; your father——"

"Con——, I mean, when my father knows Nellie——"

"Will he ever know her? Will he give himself the chance of finding out what she really is? Unless I have been misinformed about Sir Robert's character, he never will."

"Well, I admit that he has rather old-fashioned notions; but that needn't matter to Nellie and me. I don't care what he thinks."

"But I do," said the farmer; "and he shall never have the power to say that I schemed to get a good match for my daughter. I am as proud a man as Sir Robert Lethbridge."

"Prouder, I think," said Harry.

He went on pleading his cause, however, till Mr. Lockhart conceded so much as this—that if Sir Robert gave his consent to the marriage he would not refuse his. Harry felt that this was hardly promising; but with a lover's hopefulness he assured himself that his father would yield on learning that his happiness depended on this marriage, and so permitted himself that one day of happiness with Nellie which her parents had not the heart to refuse.

Lady Braithwaite came down to see Mrs. Lockhart next day. "I am most sorry this has happened, dear," she said. "You know what I think of Nellie—that she is a wife worthy of any man, and that if I had a son I would gladly see her married to him. But Sir Robert Lethbridge has the strongest prejudices of any man I know. He will never consent to his son marrying Nellie, and as Harry is quite dependent on his father he can't afford to defy him."

"It would be useless if he did," answered Mrs. Lockhart. "My husband is quite as much annoyed at this affair as Sir Robert can possibly be. He hates the idea of a child of his being supposed to have any idea of thrusting herself into a rank above her; and will never consent to her entering a family which does not receive her willingly."

"Then," said Lady Braithwaite—"poor Nellie!"

Nellie was indeed to be pitied. Sir Robert behaved as he was expected to do

—refused his consent unconditionally, and in addition described the poor girl and her parents as mercenary schemers. Harry would have risked all consequences and married his sweetheart without paternal consent, but he had to reckon with Nellie's parents too. Mr. Lockhart had told his daughter that he expected Sir Robert to oppose Harry's wishes, and had made her promise that she would listen to no suggestions for a clandestine marriage. "It would break my heart, Nellie," he said, "if you married without my consent; and I will never consent to your taking a man whose relations look down on you. I am as proud of my name as Sir Robert Lethbridge can be of his, and it has never been said that a Lockhart pushed himself where he wasn't wanted, or sought an honour that was grudged him."

Nellie was gent's and obedient, and, moreover, had a fair share of the Lockhart pride. Besides, she did not think it wholly possible that Sir Robert could hold out against her lover's appeal—it would have been so hard for her to refuse any request of his; and if Sir Robert only knew how much she and Harry loved each other, he would surely yield. So she gave the promise her father required.

Soon there came a letter from Harry announcing his father's decision, and begging to have the condition of Sir Robert's consent removed. Mr. Lockhart stood firm, and Harry made another effort to gain the approval of his family. It was as useless as the previous one, and this time Sir Robert was rash enough to make some disparaging remark about Nellie and her parents. His son resented this, and retorted that Miss Lockhart was better born than Miss Vandelden, the American heiress whom his elder brother had lately married, and that the Lockharts would not have run after him as Mr. and Mrs. Saturnus Vandelden did after the heir to the baronetcy. At this, Sir Robert, who had encouraged the American match, lost his temper, and he and his son quarrelled. Harry went back to the Lockharts' to say that his father's will had no further influence over him, and that he would not insult Nellie by asking him to accept her as a daughter.

But before Harry arrived, there had come a letter from Sir Robert to Mr. Lockhart, accusing him of all the farmer had dreaded—seeking to push himself into a good family, and "scheming to hook a good-natured simpleton." So Mr. Lock-

hart met young Lethbridge with an anger that dwarfed Sir Robert's, and vowed that though the Baronet should now beg him to give his daughter to Harry, he would not consent.

Harry's pleading, Nellie's tears, and Mrs. Lockhart's reasoning, availed only so far as to bring matters back to their original position. If Nellie could be received into the Lethbridge family with honour and welcome, she might do so—not otherwise. With this forlorn hope, Harry was dismissed, and Mr. Lockhart said to his daughter:

"Now, Nellie, the sooner you put Mr. Lethbridge out of your mind, the better. I would rather see you married to any man in the world than to his father's son."

That Nellie fretted and mourned may be taken for granted; but she made no protest. Whoever insulted her father insulted her; and with her heart breaking for love of Harry Lethbridge, she let him go until such time as his father should repent of his injustice—a thing hardly to be expected in this world. She strove to be brave; but she was not fitted to fight and conquer trouble, and she grew haggard and pale. After about six months there came a letter from Lady Braithwaite, now in London, to her mother, which contained these words: "Nothing has grieved me more than Harry Lethbridge's recent doings. There is hardly a vice into which he has not plunged; he is utterly changed from his former self, and I used to think so much of him. His people are deeply distressed, though I must say that I think Sir Robert has brought this trouble upon himself, by his obstinacy about Nellie. But tell her to forget him as completely as she can; he is not a fit husband for her now."

Mrs. Lockhart put the letter in her daughter's hand, and left her to read it alone. An hour afterwards, Nellie came to her, pale, and not free from traces of tears, but quiet and composed. "Mamma, I am going to be different now," she said. "I have fretted too long. If he can't be good for my sake, I don't want to have anything to do with him."

She had withdrawn herself as much as possible from society of any sort during the last few months; but now she went about everywhere, and carried a brave face to hide her sad heart; and when, next autumn—just about the time when Harry Lethbridge had made love to her—she was asked to spend a few weeks with some friends of her mother's in the next county, she accepted the invitation readily.

CHAPTER II.

"I KNEW"—said Mrs. Lockhart, when she told the story—"that Mrs. Harrison's brother was staying with her at the time, and I thought it possible, from some hints she had given me before, that she would like him to marry Nellie. I was quite willing. The Mansons were nice people and Charlie, Mrs. Harrison's youngest brother—Are you cold, Miss Adeane? I thought you shivered just now—was, as I remembered him, a bright, good-looking fellow, a good deal younger than his sister. They were people of our own class, and could not disparage my Nellie, who, with her pretty face and sweet temper, and the money she would have, was quite a good match for any of them. Of course I put her face first and the money second. I didn't guess that Mrs. Harrison reversed the order; still less did I surmise that Charlie Manson's case was parallel to Harry Lethbridge's—that he too cared for some one of whom his family disapproved. I don't know anything about the girl, not even her name; but I believe it was only because she was one of a large family, and would bring no fortune to her husband, that old Mr. Manson objected to her. All this I found out afterwards; at the time I was told only that he would be delighted if Charlie married my girl, and would do more for him in that case than otherwise."

"When there's no love on either side it is easy to arrange a marriage: there is no shyness or diffidence to contend with, nor any hesitation about ending the happy days of courtship. In three weeks Nellie came back and told us that she had accepted Charlie Manson, subject to our consent. That was readily granted, for my husband was delighted at the opportunity of showing the Lethbridges how little we desired an alliance with them, and I hoped that, in so young a girl, the new love would drive out the old. Charlie seemed fond of her, too; but it is so easy for a man to pretend affection for a girl—caresses are easy to him—and we did not look with over-critical eyes."

"The marriage was to take place early in the new year. Nellie seemed contented. I thought she would be happy; I felt as if our sorrows were at an end, when my peace was shaken. Three days before the wedding there came a letter to Nellie. I knew the writing. It was Harry Lethbridge's. I always took the letters out of

the post-bag myself; and when I saw this I hesitated for a moment before putting it with the other notes that came to Nellie that day. I hesitated because I was tempted. Looking across the table to my girl's sweet, placid face, I could not bear to disturb its calm by letting her read what I thought was sure to be either a useless plea or an unjust reproach. So—I kept the letter and put it in my pocket.

"My first instinct was to return it to the writer unopened. Had I followed it, I would have felt comparatively guiltless to-day. But I was curious to know what he would say, so I broke the seal. The contents were not what I expected. It was a passionate, joyous love-letter, full of good news. His father had consented to his marrying Nellie.

"He has found out," he said, "what a poor thing my life is likely to be without you—you will have to forgive me more than I like to think of, dear—and so he has yielded. With you by my side, I know that I shall live worthily again; you are my good angel."

"It was a grievous strait for me. On the one side stood this man who loved Nellie, and whom she had once loved. On the other stood Charlie Manson with his unquestioned right, and—I believed—his love, and the repute of throwing over an accepted suitor for the sake of one in a better position. I fear it was the last consideration that decided me. Both my husband and I were, as perhaps you have seen, morbidly, wickedly proud; and to that pride we sacrificed our child's happiness. I wrote to Mr. Lethbridge, telling him that Nellie was to be married in a few days, and—this was cruel of me—that when she heard of his evil courses she had ceased to love him. That was true, according to what Nellie had said, but in my inmost heart I doubted if I could vouch for it. But I wrote it to him, and said that the only favour he could now show us was to let us forget his existence. Of course I told him that I had taken upon myself the responsibility of keeping back his letter, and so tried to clear my conscience of deceit.

"The marriage took place, and, for a time, I was happy, in spite of the reply Harry Lethbridge sent to my letter. He did not reproach me—no one has ever reproached me—but he said that he was ashamed to think that his follies had grieved Nellie, and that, for her sake, though she was lost to him, he would strive to live as she would have wished.

And he said he was going to America. I thought that settled everything, and told myself that I had acted for the best, and that, whatever happened, Nellie's peace was secured. Ah me! Nellie's peace was banished for ever.

"I had a good husband myself; I had never in my life known harshness or neglect, and, though I had heard of cruelty on the part of men to their wives, I had never realised it as an actual fact. I was slow to suspect that Nellie's marriage was not a happy one. We visited her once in her new home just after she went to it, and she seemed happy enough; not so gay as she had been once, before she ever saw Harry Lethbridge, but peaceful and contented; and when an occasional look of sadness crossed her face, I set it down to memories of the past which would grow fainter every day.

"I did, indeed, question her, but even a mother durst not pry too much into the confidence of a wedded pair.

"You are happy, dear?" I asked. "Your husband is kind to you?"

"Oh yes, mamma," she answered, "he lets me have my own way in everything."

"That was a reply to only one of my questions, but I took it to represent both.

"I thought he would," I went on. "His sister told me a woman could do what she liked with him."

"Not any woman," said Nellie quickly.

"Of course not. A woman he loved."

"Ah, that's different," she observed, and then she asked me to come and look at the new greenhouse she was having built, and so we got to talking about flowers and such things, and I asked nothing more.

"After that she always offered to visit us. She said she liked to see us and the old home too. Of course her father and I were pleased; but she came so frequently that I said at last:

"Doesn't Charlie get cross at your running away from him so often? It must be lonely for him."

"He has his own friends and his own pursuits," she answered.

"This alarmed me a little.

"My dear," I said, "he should have no friends and no pursuits that you do not share; you must be Charlie's companion in every way." And then, thinking that perhaps she was a little cold to him, I gave her a great deal of advice about a wife's duties.

"She listened quietly, but not very attentively, and when I had finished she said with a little laugh:

"You judge all men by papa; but Charlie is different. My companionship isn't necessary to his happiness."

"Is he coming to spend a day or two with us when he takes you home?" I asked.

"I don't think he'll come at all. I can go home alone. He—he will probably be busy now."

"Busy! A farmer who doesn't farm, but leaves the management of everything to his bailiff, is never very busy."

"There's the—the hunting."

"Nellie, one wouldn't think you were a country girl. People don't hunt in April; you know that."

"I meant—I meant some races he is going to."

"If he can't give up going to races in order to take his wife home——" I began, when suddenly Nellie began to cry.

"Oh! mamma," she exclaimed, "don't worry so. If I can bear Charlie's ways, you needn't grumble at them."

"It was a speech quite unlike Nellie, who was always gentle and courteous to her parents, but I did not heed that; but it was the first indication I had received that Charlie had 'ways' that were hard to bear."

"The next showed me more clearly that my poor girl did not want me to know the circumstances of her life. I had a letter from Mrs. Harrison in which she said: 'I was sorry that I could not go to Nellie as she asked me, when she was ill; but as you were sure to be with her, it did not matter much.' This was the first news I had had of Nellie being ill. She lived twenty miles away from us, it is true; but Mrs. Harrison's house was farther off still; and I was her mother. Why had she not sent for me? I hurried off that very day, without giving her any warning of my intention, and found Nellie on the sofa, looking pale and feeble. When I took her to task for not sending for me, she had a host of poor excuses. She did not want to make me anxious; it was Charlie's idea to have his sister there; she wasn't really ill, but she had had a fright which had shaken her—she was always too nervous."

"What frightened you?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing!"

"It must have been something," I persisted.

"Charlie came home late," was the only explanation I could get. But that evening—my arrival was unexpected, you know—I found out what his coming home late

meant. There's no good talking about it, a man stupefied and incensed with strong drink is not a pleasant thing, but he was my darling's husband, and I could not restrain myself. Thinking of all that a proud, refined girl like her must have suffered, I spoke very bitterly. He was not too intoxicated to take in what I said, he had only lost the discretion I now discovered that he had displayed in his intercourse with Nellie's family.

"It's all very well for you to talk," he said; "you take Nellie's part, of course; but if there's anything wrong it's all her own fault. If she had cared for me, she could have kept me straight enough."

"If you had cared for her, there would have been no necessity for keeping you straight, as you call it," I retorted.

"You can't care for a woman who's as cold as a stone; who measures off what she considers her duty, and does that and no more. She had her chance. A wife can always conquer in the long run, if she chooses to take the trouble. She has a chance that can't be taken from her, and if Nellie had loved me she might have managed me well enough. But she never will now. I know by this time how much she cares for me; and it isn't much of a reward for all I gave up in marrying her."

"All you gave up? All you gained, you mean!" I cried.

"There was more lost than won," he answered.

"I would have questioned him farther, but Nellie interfered."

"Let us go to bed, mamma, it is very late, and you have had a journey to-day," she said. "And there's no use talking; it does no good."

"She slept with me that night, for I felt that I could not let her go out of my sight; and all through the dark hours we two lay awake, I sobbing and mourning, she doing her best to comfort me—she who was the sufferer. But her very defence of her husband showed the hidden sorrow of her life."

"You must not blame him too much for being what he is. He can't feel towards me as you and papa do. He didn't love me when he married me; he cared for someone else, whom his family disliked."

"He did not love you!" I exclaimed, "and yet he dared——"

"Hush, dear," she whispered, "we must not judge him too harshly. He did no worse than I."

"I was silenced for a moment. Her

words were too true. But I said, 'you have tried to do your duty, and he has failed in his.'

"Ah!" she answered, 'a man's despair takes a different form from a woman's; and without love I couldn't do my duty rightly, for my duty was to win him. I didn't know that when I married; and you, mamma, couldn't tell it to me, for you had never known love and duty apart from each other. I will do what I can; I try my best; but Heaven only knows what the end will be.'

"She sent me home next day; she was proud still, and would have no one know what she suffered, not even her father, who, she knew, would have interfered at any cost to save her from her husband's treatment. But things could not be hidden for ever, especially as Charlie was wholly dependent on his father, who had given him money when he married to take and stock a large farm. He had thought all would go well with him after that; but Charlie's folly and neglect soon drove him into debt, and his father refused to help him farther. Nellie, poor Nellie, asked us to come to the rescue; but my husband was firm in saying that whatever he gave her must be so settled that her husband could not touch it. So the end of it was that within two years of her marriage they were utterly ruined. My husband and old Mr. Manson had to step in and save Charlie from the shame of bankruptcy. Charlie himself said he would go to Australia and start afresh there—I doubt if any fresh start of his could be of use—and Nellie, poor child! came back to her old home.

"She came back dying—dying of a broken heart. She had always been used to tenderness, and the misery of her married life coming when she most needed the utmost patience and care that love could give, was too much for her. We tried to save her; but it was too late. The cross had been too heavy for her; she only wished now to hide her sorrows in the grave.

"For nearly a year we watched her fading. She was serene and patient, thankful, perhaps to be free from active grief; and a sad peace fell upon our household. But one day I was asked to go to the door to speak to a gentleman who would not come in. I went, bewildered at the request, for such behaviour is foreign to country manners, and there I saw Harry Lethbridge. For a moment everything whirled around me; I could not utter a word even of

surprise. But he did not wait for me to speak, nor did he offer any conventional greeting.

"I have seen Lady Braithwaite,' he began, 'and she gave me sad tidings. Is it true?'

"The worst she can have told you is true,' I said, and drew him into the dining-room, which was the nearest room, and there answered all his questions. Nellie was upstairs asleep; and it was a comfort to me to have someone to whom I dared tell all. He had returned from America only for a visit, for he had now settled in the West, and had gone to Lady Braithwaite for news of the woman he still loved. He listened in silence to what I had to say; only when I had finished he lifted his head and said:

"May Heaven forgive the man who made my darling suffer!'

"Ah!" I cried, 'why do you not blame me? If only I had not suppressed that letter.'

"Yes,' he said quietly, 'it might have been better for all of us.' After a pause he went on, 'I was very bitter against you, at first; but I understand now how you came to do it, and I can pardon it.'

"What are you going to do?' I asked after that.

"While Nellie lives I shall stay in the neighbourhood.'

"I think——' I began nervously; but he interrupted me.

"Don't fear; I shall do nothing to trouble you. Let me stay near, to hear of her condition till the end arrives, which you say must soon come. It's strange, perhaps, that I should talk of that so calmly; but she has been so more than lost to me for years, that death will seem to restore her. Do not let her know I am here; but I will stay at the nearest town, and you can write to me occasionally and tell me how she is.'

"We arranged it so finally, and he went away. And when I saw Nellie again after she had awakened, she smiled and said, 'I feel better, mamma; I have had such pleasant dreams.'

"But she grew swiftly weaker; a few weeks must end all. I wrote to Harry Lethbridge almost daily, and my husband saw him several times in the town. He rarely replied, but every day or two he sent over a quantity of lovely flowers. Nellie used to delight in their beauty and fragrance, but—and this surprised me—she never asked whence they came. Life and its interests were slipping from her; but at the last, just a day or two before

she died, she said to me quite calmly, 'It was Harry who sent the flowers so often, was it not?'

"Yes, dear," I answered. 'How did you know?'

"I cannot tell; they seemed to speak to me of him. Tell him that, though I have not seen him, it has gladdened me to know that he is near me at the last."

"Would you like to see him?" I asked.

"There is no need. I feel him near me, and I have nothing to say to him that I would not rather keep till we meet in heaven."

"Then—for I felt that I could not let her die without knowing the whole truth—I told her of the letter I had kept back. She was silent for a little; then she said, 'Poor mamma! You could not know how things would turn out. And since good Heaven has permitted all this, it must mean something, though we don't understand what. Don't fret, dear; there's all eternity before us in which to right the wrongs of time.'"

These were almost the last words she spoke. She died next day. Harry Lethbridge came and looked at her as she lay in her coffin, and laid white flowers on her breast, and placed a ring on her finger. There was a strange light in his eyes, as if he was raised beyond all grief and mourning to a great joy.

"I bought that ring for her," he said, 'when my father yielded, and I thought she was to be my wife. She is mine now; death has united us, and so she shall wear my love-token.'

"He went back to America after that; but by his orders her grave has always white flowers scattered on it, and every year he comes over and visits it."

Mrs. Lockhart ended her story, and I saw the tears—the tears of long, familiar grief—in her eyes.

"And what became of — of — her husband?" I asked.

"He died not long ago. I don't believe his Australian career will bear looking into, though his sister did tell me that he was trying to reform, and had begun to get on. Of course his family make out the best case they can for him; but I can't forgive him. Mrs. Harrison admitted, too, that the friend who wrote and told them of his death, said that his last words were: 'Tell Muriel I am sorry!' Muriel, you see—the girl he had been in love with all along. He could remember her when he was dying; he had forgotten my dead saint—his wife."

She did not notice the colour that dyed my face; she could not guess the cry of thankfulness that went up from my soul to Heaven, that Charlie Manson had remembered me at the last, and that he was trying—ah! my poor Charlie, I know how difficult it was for you!—trying to reform. She was absorbed in her own sad memories.

"I have learned by bitter experience," she said, "the foolishness of our human wisdom. I thought I was doing wisely in the act by which I spoiled two lives."

"Two lives!" I echoed. "May you not say four?"

"I don't understand you," she said, surprised, I fancy, at my tone.

"No, you cannot," I answered. "But, Mrs. Lockhart, your story has had another side to me; for I am Muriel Adeane, whom Charlie Manson loved."

She turned and looked at me with an imploring pained look in her eyes.

"I could not know that. I had never even heard your name in connection with him, you know. Do you hate me for what I did?"

"No, why should I? You did not know all. And I can believe, as your daughter did, that whatever Heaven permits must mean good in the end, and that we have eternity in which to right the wrongs of time. It is a poor use to make of old sorrows to found a hatred on them."

And so it has come about that I and my rival's mother are close and loving friends to-day.

MY LADY PRIMROSE.

By FREDERICK TALBOT.

THERE was a sound of distant bugling in the air—a melancholy discordant kind of bugling. Now and then the soil seemed to quake beneath the tread of some military detachment marching along with measured tramp. The voice of the drill sergeant could be heard in the land, together with the rattle of arms from some regiment on parade, and now and then a burst of military music; while penetrating these mingled sounds might be heard the warbling of skylarks from on high, or the thrilling note of a cuckoo in some far-distant plantation. All these sounds heard Sophie Gerard as she opened the window to let in the crisp morning air and the cheerful voice of spring.

Breakfast was all ready, and Sophie was

waiting, with the eager appetite of youth, for her father, Colonel Gerard, had not yet come home from his morning ride. In a general way the Colonel was a model of military punctuality, and Sophie getting impatient, went out into the porch to see if he were coming.

The hut to which the porch belonged was one of the most elaborate in the camp: a succession of tenants had added to it here and there, till it formed quite an encampment in itself; and with creepers growing about it, and a quite respectable lawn and garden in front, the place had really a cosy, cheerful appearance.

As Sophie scanned the long line of white road, bordered by copses of birch which were now in their freshest green, without seeing any figure that she could recognise as her father's, the garden gate opened, and a young soldier entered, a Sergeant by his stripes, and, with a formal salute, passed on towards the Colonel's office, which was on the further side of the hut.

"Sergeant Arthur!" said the girl in a hesitating voice.

The young man stopped with a pleasant smile, again raising his hand to the salute, and awaited the young lady's commands.

"My father has not returned yet—I feel quite uneasy."

"Is Malec with the Colonel?" asked the Sergeant quickly.

"Malec here," said the individual in question, putting out his brown face from the door of a wooden outbuilding which represented the butler's pantry. "Malec here," he repeated coming forth boldly as if with sinister designs for the Sergeant. Then seeing for the first time his young mistress at the door, he made a profound obeisance, so that he almost touched the ground with his snowy turban.

Just then the Colonel arrived at the door; he had galloped across the lines in a different direction from that expected. The soldier-groom came forward to receive the horse; Malec held his master's stirrup in an attitude of proud humility; the Sergeant saluted once more; and Sophie ran forward to take from her father's hand a basket covered with green vine-leaves, which he held out to her.

"I'm awfully sorry to have kept you waiting," said the Colonel to his daughter as they sat down to breakfast, with Malec waiting behind his master's chair; "but those grapes must be my excuse. The fact is I met Crump as I was cantering along, and he stopped me and

insisted on my going to see his vinerias. He's an early bird like myself. Oh! and Mrs. Crump is coming over to call upon you this very day."

"What! Lady Primrose?" said Sophie, with a shrug of the shoulders, and looking rather dissatisfied.

"Yes, Lady Primrose, as the people call her," rejoined the Colonel. "And if you can make a friend of her, Sophie, I shall be very glad. Her father was a very dear old friend of mine, and poor Guy—well, he was very fond of her, poor boy!"

Here the Colonel's voice became husky and broken. Three years had elapsed since the death of his son Guy, a promising and enthusiastic young officer of Engineers, who, having undertaking a dangerous surveying expedition among the higher passes of Afghanistan, had been cut off by a native tribe, and destroyed with all his party—all except one man.

Colonel Gerard adopted this faithful Pathan, whose name had been shortened to Malec, as his own personal attendant, and brought him home with him when the Colonel returned from India to take up a Staff appointment in England.

The Colonel had another retainer, whose services were to be measured rather in the scale of good-will than in any more rigid fashion. This was Mrs. Bridget, or Aunt Biddie—as she was generally known in camp or cantonment—the widow of a Sergeant in the corps, who had acted as nurse to little Master Guy and Miss Sophie, and who, since the death of the Colonel's wife, exercised a mild control over her master's simple household. As for Sergeant John Arthur, who was the Colonel's principal assistant in his office-work, he was a new acquaintance altogether, and did not belong to the corps—the Engineering Corps, that is—but had been taken up on an emergency from some Line regiment, and had proved so desirable in every way, that the Colonel insisted on keeping him. The young man was accomplished as a draughtsman, as a linguist; in fact, he was thoroughly well educated, and, off duty, had the manners and bearing of a gentleman. Sophie admired him immensely, all the more from the spice of mystery there was about him. The Colonel had a real affection for the Sergeant, who reminded him in some respects of his son Guy. Often he had tried to draw him out on the subject of his past history, but on this point the Sergeant was impenetrable.

Soon after luncheon, on the day when

this narrative begins, Mrs. Crump's carriage drew up by the porch of the Colonel's hut, and Mrs. Crump herself was introduced by Malec into Sophie's presence. Sophie was naturally nervous, for she had only been for a few weeks at the head of her father's house, and this was the first visitor she had received from the outside world. Of course she had formed the acquaintance of the wives and daughters of the camp; but these belonged, as it were, to the family, and had never seemed formidable. But neither was Mrs. Crump at all formidable. Those who had called her Lady Primrose, had somehow hit off an appropriate sobriquet. She was fair, rather pale, with beautiful golden hair, and had a somewhat pensive expression in general, relieved at times by a frank and fascinating smile.

Lady Primrose met Sophie's embarrassed greeting by a hearty embrace. "So you are Guy's sister!" she said, holding the girl at arm's length. "You are ten thousand times better-looking than ever Guy was; but you have his smile, my dear, that heart-breaking smile, and his beautiful eyes."

"Then you were fond of Guy?" said Sophie, tremulously.

"Fond" isn't the word, child," replied Lady Primrose. "I loved him, and yet I sent him away to his death."

"I beg your pardon, ladies," said a voice at this moment. "I did not know anyone was here. The Colonel wanted a book!"

Here Lady Primrose turned upon the intruder, who fled precipitately without waiting for the required volume.

"Who is that?" asked Lady Primrose, who had caught a glimpse of the retreating figure, and who looked rather scared.

"Oh, that is one of my father's assistants," said Sophie. "He is not particularly shy, but you seem to have frightened him."

"My dear, he frightened me: just the turn of his figure reminded me so strongly——"

"Not of Guy?" asked Sophie, wonderingly.

"No, not of him—of another." But the interruption had checked the flow of Lady Primrose's confidences, and now her talk flowed on in more conventional channels. And Sophie must come and stay at Crumpefts; that was imperative, if her father consented. The only question was, how soon could she be ready—in two hours?

"No, not possibly in two hours," Sophie protested.

But here the Colonel came in and cut

short her objections. A soldier's daughter should be ready to march anywhere at an hour's notice. So the Colonel called Mrs. Bridget, and bade her pack his daughter's trunks, and get everything ready for her departure. Lady Primrose drove away, having other calls to make, promising to return and carry off Sophie at the appointed time.

"But you will be so lonely, papa," said Sophie, feeling that she too would be lonely in a big house, where all were strangers to her.

"My dear, I am used to being lonely," said the Colonel with a sigh; "that is, if I can be considered lonely with Bridget to look after me, and all the kind friends I have about me."

When Sophie was all ready and only waiting for Lady Primrose's carriage, she went into the Engineers' office to bid her father a final good-bye. Her father's place was vacant; but at a side-table sat Sergeant Arthur. He had a sketching-block before him, and was rapidly tinting in a water-colour sketch. Nothing in the way of ravelins, counterscarps, or other professional subjects, but only two charming female heads. The young man was so intent upon his work that he did not hear the slight noise Sophie made in coming in. One of the heads was decidedly Lady Primrose's, and a bunch of primroses at the throat was her appropriate badge. The other head, Sophie was inclined to think was her own; and she felt a certain satisfaction in recognising that the artist had expended far more loving pains over this last, which he had adorned with a bunch of violets.

The Sergeant placed his sketch hastily in a drawer and sprang to his feet as he recognised Sophie's presence. "Your father is out, Miss Gerard; he is gone to head-quarters."

Sophie felt a slight embarrassment under the young man's ardent, but respectful scrutiny. "I am going away," she faltered, "and I will say good-bye now. You will take care of papa."

This last request sprung unpremeditated from her lips. Surely it was rather an absurd one.

"I will look after the Colonel," said the Sergeant gravely, "as long as I am here. But before you return I shall probably have rejoined my regiment."

"Oh, I hope not," said Sophie in dismay, "I don't know what my father would do without you."

"I shall be very sorry to leave the Colonel," said the Sergeant, still gravely, "but in the way of duty, Miss Gerard, things often come uncommonly hard."

Sophie sighed involuntarily, and said that "no doubt they did sometimes;" and then she shook hands with the young man and departed.

The life at Crumpetts Sophie found pleasant enough. The house was rambling, old-fashioned, and handsome. The hot-houses and conservatories were show places for the country-side, and the gardens were already gay with the flowers of every possible kind of bulb. Mr. Crump was exceedingly kind, if somewhat solemn and elderly in manner, and his wife was all kindness and sweetness. Not very much was seen of Mr. Crump, for his parliamentary duties kept him in town all the week; but he always came home for Saturday and Sunday.

At fifty years of age, Mr. Crump had all the reputation of a misogynist. He was not really such, but only extremely shy and sensitive: still he would probably have gone down to his grave with that reputation but for an occurrence which brought him perforce into contact with feminine influence. Mr. Crump's nephew and heir presumptive, Arthur Crump, had been brought up in the expectation of succeeding to the family estates. After his uncle, indeed, he was the only representative of that family—the most ancient in the county. Arthur had been educated at Winchester and Oxford at his uncle's charges, who provided him with a liberal allowance. The young man had an ardent desire to enter the army, and to this also his uncle consented; and Arthur had begun to "cram" for the examination with a Colonel Hughes, who had a reputation in that line, when he fell hopelessly in love with the Colonel's lovely daughter, Lettice. Now this was more than Mr. Crump had bargained for, and on his part the Colonel was equally unsympathetic. After all, the young man had nothing in the world but what he had from his uncle, and it was the height of folly for Lettice to encourage him. Lettice indeed protested that she never did encourage him; that she liked his friend and Sophie's brother, Guy, a great deal better; but that she was carried away by the young man's ardour and perseverance, and plighted her troth to him just for the sake of peace and quietness.

When Mr. Crump came up to town to discuss his nephew's entanglement with Colonel Hughes, nothing could have been

prettier or more dutiful than her behaviour. Rather than incur her father's displeasure, and ruin the prospects of her dear Arthur, she would release her lover, and cancel their engagement with a general exchange of letters and tokens.

Mr. Crump was delighted with the young lady's behaviour; he was fascinated with her sweet face and charming manner.

"And when I found he wanted me for himself," asked Lady Primrose piteously, "what was I to do?"

Unhappily for himself, young Arthur did not take the same common-sense view of things. His uncle had every intention of dealing liberally with him; but his own violent conduct, and especially the reproaches he showered upon his uncle's intended bride, put an end to any kind of arrangement. His uncle cast him off completely, and forbade his name to be mentioned. The young man had his pride and his anger to begin the world upon, with a few debts perhaps, and not a penny more from his uncle. And so he had departed into outer darkness. No one knew what had become of him, but Madame Lettice was still a little afraid of him.

The fate of Arthur Crump, however, would have been of small importance had Lady Primrose been blessed with children. But she had been married now five years, and there were no children. And Mr. Crump was terribly puzzled as to how to dispose of the ancestral estate. A handsome portion, in lands and money, had been settled on Lady Primrose absolutely. But the main part of the estate, which was free from entail or settlement—that estate of Crumpetts, of which it should be noted that the local and correct pronunciation is Cranshets—had been held by a Crump since the days of the Heptarchy.

Could a Crump be disinherited? and his fields, could they be held by a stranger?

This was the burning question at Crumpetts just then, but it did not appear on the surface. Outwardly, Lady Primrose was engrossed with politics; she was at the head of the Primrose League in her district, and she was doing her best to make her husband's return a certainty for the next contest. At the last election his majority had been a narrow one, and hence, when Mr. Crump had been offered a minor, but dignified, office in the administration he had been advised not to risk an election, and the possible loss of a seat. This was a great disappointment for Lady Primrose, who was nothing if not ambitious.

But if she could make the seat secure, perhaps they, the official people, would make her husband a peer—he would not accept a baronetcy—and then she would be Lady Primrose in good faith.

Yet, with all these schemes working in her head, Lady Primrose had such an elasticity of temperament that she made a very agreeable hostess. She gathered about her all the young men of the neighbourhood; there were dances, dinner-parties, with occasional flying visits to London with evenings at the theatre, and, on one memorable occasion when Mr. Crump was expected to address the House, a visit to the ladies' gallery of the House of Commons.

And the country drives were also delightful—among the heaths and commons, and through the quaint old country villages, and by-woods, and copses, and sunken lanes overarched with trees. One little glen had been cleared entirely of its underwood during the preceding autumn, and thus, on both sides, it was now a glowing mass of primroses, picked out with knots of blue hyacinths, and graceful wind-flowers.

And her ladyship had begged a holiday for the girls at the village school, and had turned them all into the glen to gather primroses with which to decorate her rooms for a grand Primrose Ball, which she was giving to all the neighbourhood. A cart-load of buns and great cans of milk were brought there for the children, and great was the enjoyment of all concerned.

Colonel Gerard had ridden over from the camp, and joined the party in the glen. He delighted in children, and soon made friends among the pretty, blue-eyed country lasses.

But when they all returned to the house for luncheon, the Colonel proved to be dull and out of spirits. This was the anniversary of his son's death, and though he made no allusion to the circumstance, Sophie remembered it, and divined the cause of her father's melancholy. Lady Primrose was quite distressed when Sophie confided the matter to her.

"And I have chosen this day of all others for my ball! How heartless I must seem!"

Sophie thought that, on the contrary, dear Lady Primrose had too much heart. There was poor Guy, whom she had loved although she had rejected him; and there was young Crump, for whom she really must have cared at one time; and then she must certainly have some affection for the

husband who was so devoted to her. For the poor youth who had lost love and everything else that makes life desirable at one fell stroke, Sophie felt a wonderful compassion and tenderness.

The Colonel would not stay for the Primrose Ball; but he was coming next day to carry his daughter off. Not back to the camp; he had done with that altogether after to-morrow. His term of service on the Staff would soon expire, and he had obtained leave to the end of his term. He was about to lose his right-hand man, Sergeant Arthur, and that was the last straw; and now he would retire. He had indeed taken a little place eight or ten miles beyond Crumpefts, and, if Sophie thought it would do, he would buy it and hope to end his days there.

Some disappointment was visible in Sophie's face as she heard this news. The life in camp had been a novelty, and had pleased her; and why should her father place himself upon the shelf when he might easily obtain a renewal of his appointment? And surely Sergeant Arthur's services might be retained by using a little influence in the right quarter. But here was the strangest part of the affair. The Colonel had ascertained that Arthur had been recalled to his regiment at his own request, sacrificing extra pay and other advantages.

"We got on so well together, too," said the Colonel. "Can you possibly, Sophie, have offended him by any of your girlish tricks?"

Now Sophie felt sure that whatever might be the Sergeant's feelings towards her, they were in no way unfriendly. And then a glimpse of the truth was revealed to her. Arthur might have found himself growing too fond of the Colonel's daughter, and honourably had determined to remove himself from temptation.

For all the regrets she might have felt, Sophie enjoyed herself wonderfully well at the Primrose Ball. It was a general gathering, to which anybody, who was not directly hostile to the primrose badge, was invited; and Sophie's instructions were to be agreeable to everybody, especially to the young men, whose suffrages were easier to win and retain than those of their elders. And Sophie found herself in great request, and yet distributed her dances fairly among the different social strata, and was in no wise behind Lady Primrose in general estimation.

It was nearly daylight when the last of

the guests drove away, and Sophie did not make her appearance downstairs till nearly luncheon time. Lady Primrose had been about for hours, and looked as fresh as—it will not do to say a primrose, for that fades quickly enough, and all the decorations of the ball-room were now flaccid and withered—but as fresh as the primrose's humble companion, the daisy.

Mr. Crump, too, was at home; but sitting up late did not seem to agree with him, although he ought to have been accustomed to it from his parliamentary experience; but, anyhow, he looked haggard and worn.

Sophie had a busy afternoon in getting all her things packed with the help of Lady Primrose's maid. At five o'clock Colonel Gerard would call for his daughter in his dog-cart, and drive her to the new house, where dinner would be ready for them, Malec and Mrs. Bridget having gone to the house in advance.

At the camp, Sergeant Arthur had also packed together his small belongings, and was taking a last look at the place which had been made bright to him by so much kindness, and, latterly, by the light of a growing passion for the Colonel's daughter. He had just shaken hands with the old Colonel, and the last words had been spoken huskily enough on both sides. Arthur felt it as if he had been parting with a father. The light in the office had grown somewhat dim, for the weather had changed rather suddenly, and a thick sea-fog was driving rapidly across the country and making everything dark and gloomy. Arthur stirred up the office fire with a shiver, and drew his seat up to the shabby Ordnance fender, feeling unaccountably gloomy and depressed. The Colonel and his daughter would have a wretched drive all through that lonely half-wild country.

The Sergeant must have fallen into a doze over the fire, for he roused himself presently with a start, feeling that there was a cold blast of air blowing in upon him. He sprang to his feet; a tall, gaunt figure confronted him, with gleaming eyes peering from a face frightfully pale.

"You are Guy Gerard!" shouted the Sergeant, mechanically putting himself in a posture of defence—"or his ghost."

"I am Guy, sure enough, and no ghost," said the other, in a hollow voice, although not much better. "But who are you? Arthur Crump, as I live!"

"Guy, old man! and you really are

alive!" cried Arthur, eagerly holding out his hand.

But the other drew back.

"Can you offer me that hand fairly and honestly, Arthur? Did you act the part of a true friend to me?"

"Always, Guy," said Arthur firmly. "If you mean about your old sweetheart and mine—she need never come between us. You know, I suppose, that she married my uncle John."

"Is that so?" cried the revenant. "I thought that she had married you. Give me your hand, old boy." It was a skinny, wasted hand that the speaker offered to his friend. "But what is this, old man?" he continued, passing his hand over the other's left arm, and feeling the Sergeant's stripes thereon. "What! did you come to grief?"

"Even so, Captain," said Arthur, saluting gravely. "But just for an hour in the twilight let us be old friends again and sit down and tell me your adventures."

It appeared that Mr. Gerard had not been killed, although left for dead. He had been picked up by some friendly Tajiks, who were travelling through the passes with a trading caravan, and taken to Balkh, where he lived for some years as one among the people who had rescued him. Here was a wonderful opportunity for studying the country, and the manners, and language of its inhabitants; and it was with reluctance that, when an opportunity offered, he left his friends and joined a trading party, bound for the shores of the Caspian. Thence he made his way to Constantinople, and so home, without any further adventures.

"And I haven't come home as a pauper, either," said Guy. "I made money out there trading in notions. And, indeed, I don't think I should ever have come home at all, if it had not been for the thought of my old dad grieving for me."

"But you sent no telegram or letter to your father," said Arthur, reproachfully.

"I had a reason for that, too," replied Guy. "The truth was, I doubted if I should ever reach home alive, I felt so bad; and I thought it would be cruel to give him the pang of losing me again. As it is, I doubt if I shall ever be good for much again. You have no idea what a gash the scoundrel gave me with his villainous kris. I seem to feel it now."

"One of those fiendish Ghilzais, I suppose?"

"No Ghilzai at all," cried Guy in-

dignantly ; "but my own pet Pathan, the truest of the true, as I thought him. He had taken some fancied insult from me months before, and brooded over it ever after, and when we were among the hills, he brought some of his precious countrymen down upon us, and wiped us out. But he reserved me for his own hand, and as I lay there dying, as he thought, he cursed me and all my lineage, and swore, upon the knife that was red with my blood, that he would offer us all up as a sacrifice to his precious god, or, as we should call him, devil. So much for the pious Malec."

Arthur stared at his friend in blank horror and amazement.

"Why, that is the wretch who is your father's faithful and trusty attendant."

"Where is he?" cried Guy wrathfully, feeling for his revolver. "Show me him, and I will kill him!"

"Be quiet, Guy," said Arthur. "You mustn't kill him. You are in a civilised country, and would be hanged for murder. Let us keep cool, Guy, and try to think the matter out. Your father has gone—about two hours ago—to take possession of his new house. He calls on his way for your sister, who is staying at Crumpetts. Malec is there to receive them, with only old Bridget in the house. But can there be any danger—after so many years of faithful service?"

"Years have nothing to do with it," cried Guy. "One of those fellows will nurse his revenge for half a lifetime. Perhaps he has had no chance before, to take both their lives. We must follow them, Arthur; a minute's delay may mean death to them both."

There was no need to urge the Sergeant to haste. The thought that poor Sophie was in danger, and the good old Colonel, nerved him to instant action. But he had to sit and think for a few minutes, before he could see his way. Horses there were plenty in the camp, but not at the disposal of any chance non-com. who chose to ask for them. As for Guy, his name was no longer in the Army List, and probably in his strange dress, and with his gaunt wild appearance, he would be set down as a lunatic by any of his brother officers.

But there was a friend of the Colonel's, an Artillery officer, who kept a couple of stout hunters at stables in the town. The officer himself was on leave; but his man would let him have the horses, if he had the Colonel's word for them. As for him-

self, if he went out of camp in uniform, he would probably be stopped and asked for his pass, and to get a pass would be an affair of hours. Well, there was an overcoat of the Colonel's hanging up in the office, and a pot-hat that was almost past service, and putting these on, Arthur took Guy by the arm and pushed rapidly for the town. The sentry they passed carried arms to them, thinking they were officers in plain clothes, and they reached the town without exciting any observation.

Happily there was no difficulty at the stables.

"Sure the Major's orders were that the Cornel might have the horses when he wanted," said the Irish groom, "and I'll be glad to have a bit of the freshness taken aff them, for it's myself's afraid to put a leg over them."

The horses were fresh enough, ready to jump out of their girths; but there was a long stretch of open heath before them, and when they had passed that the animals were more in hand. As the horsemen approached Crumpetts, they saw the house which stands on slightly rising ground, with many of its windows lighted up, and casting tremulous rays of light through the haze.

"And that is her house!" cried Guy, waving a hand in that direction. Evidently there was no other she for him, notwithstanding all he had gone through.

At the lodge gate they stopped for a moment to make sure that the Colonel had gone on. The woman at the lodge—an old servant—recognised Arthur at once.

"Why, 'tis the young Squire!" she cried. "Be you a coming back to us, sir? Oh, I be just glad!"

Cut short in her demonstrations, she was found to be thoroughly well informed as to the Colonel and his movements. He had driven up to the house; he had stayed there for a good while, and then he had driven through the gate with the young miss; and, what was more, the Squire himself, on horseback alongside of them, had gone to see them safe home.

"Thank God!" said Arthur. "If the Squire is with them there is no great danger; still let us push on."

They rode on at a pretty hard gallop over the turf. Arthur knew every inch of the way and where the best going was to be found. Taking a short cut across the common they just missed seeing a man who was trudging along with a led horse. They had ridden about a mile further when

they heard the sound of wheels and hoofs in front of them.

"All safe so far," cried Guy, nodding cheerfully to his companion.

A turn in the road brought them in sight of the vehicle and its occupants, who were driving along at a brisk trot. They had come to a cutting where the road passed between high sandy banks, each covered with a plantation of dark firs. But the moon had now risen and was shining directly into this dark gully and making everything within it visible in a manner strange and weird. The horse in the shafts was trotting bravely along, although the road was somewhat heavy and the sound of its hoofs was muffled in the soft sand. Suddenly something dark darted out in front of the vehicle: a man it seemed, who held out his arms with a strange cry. The horse reared and beat the air with its fore feet, and then the figure sprang forward like a panther, and a ripple of light darted for a moment out of the gloom. That was all they saw; but next moment the horse dashed on as if without guidance.

Galloping up, the horsemen found first a dark human form stretched across the road, writhing and contorted, but not uttering word or moan. This was Malec, the Pathan, his naked, blood-stained knife still clenched in his hand. Guy leaped from his horse, and placed his foot upon the man, drawing his revolver at the same time.

"Ride on, Arthur, and see what has happened. I dare not——"

But fifty yards further on lay another human figure, prone upon its face with arms outstretched and grey hair dabbled with blood. Ah, dead! sure enough, a gash like that was enough, and here was another streamlet of blood oozing away through the sand.

"Is it my father?" cried Guy in a deep, hoarse voice, "and is he dead?"

"I think it is he," faltered Arthur, and then he heard a click from Guy's pistol, "but not dead, I think." He said this, feeling that his friend would execute justice on his father's murderer with his own hand. "Guy, empty your revolver in the air to bring help, and I will ride after your sister."

Guy fired several shots, but reserved two, Arthur noticed as he rode on. The dog-cart was not far to seek. A countryman in a smock frock had stopped the horse, and was standing at its head, gazing

at the vehicle in a dazed and terrified manner.

And Sophie—she lay there without motion, one arm hanging over the side of the vehicle, but there was no cruel gash in that beautiful white throat. Arthur took her in his arms and kissed her in the excitement and gratitude of the moment, and she stirred faintly, and sighed as he laid her tenderly on a soft bed of bracken.

"Guy, there is still something left to live for; there is your sister," cried Arthur. "And now, my good friend," to the countryman, "help me to raise the poor old Colonel."

"Colonel!" said the countryman as he raised the head of the prostrate figure. "This ain't no Colonel. This be Squire Crump as is murdered. And you be answerable for he, young gentleman; I know you. You be the one to gain by his death. Oh, how could you hurt the dear old Squire?"

"I hurt him?" cried Arthur, sobbing, on his knees beside the well-known form; "I would have died to save him."

And then another voice sounded from out of the gloom. It was the Colonel's.

"Crump! Sophie! What has happened! Are you all safe? And Malec here! What are you doing, sir, to my servant?"

"Oh, father, don't you know me!" said another voice. "I am Guy."

It was in the midst of tribulation and distress that father and son met once more.

But old Squire Crump! Everybody mourned for him now, and recounted his good qualities. His wife was in despair. Never had so cruel a fate come to so good a man. He had met his death, indeed, a fate intended for another, through his good nature. He must needs have his horse saddled and ride off with Colonel Gerard, to show him the way over the heath, where roads, or tracks rather, are intricate, and sign-posts few. Halfway to the new house the Colonel's mare picked up a nail or a fragment of flint, anyhow, pulled up dead lame. It was cruelty to drive the horse a step further. What was to be done? Mr. Crump was in his element in a difficulty of this kind. Take the mare out, put the harness on his cob, quiet to ride and drive. There the difficulty was settled. But the mare, they could not leave her by the roadside. No, one of them must lead the mare to the road-side inn, a mile or so further on; and that one must be the Colonel. There was no help for it, and so

with much laughter and pleasant chaff the Squire and Miss Gerard had driven on; and to such a dreadful ending for one of them.

There was no doubt but that Malec intended to kill them both, but the Squire was strong enough to hurl the man down under the horse's hoofs, though not before the deadly wounds had been inflicted, and thus Sophie's life had been saved, and the gallows was robbed of its lawful prey. For Malec died in prison of the fever that supervened after his wounds from the horse's hoofs; died, too, almost in despair; for he recognised that all his dedicated victims had escaped him, and he dreaded the anger of his gods.

When Mr. Crump's will was read, it was found that he had dealt fairly by his nephew. Everything that did not strictly belong to the old estate went to the widow; and these bequests made her sufficiently rich. But Crumpet's was to go to his nephew if he could be found, with provisions otherwise, with which we need not concern ourselves—for there was no difficulty in finding him. The Colonel knew where to find him, and Sophie too; for though he got into a little trouble for being absent from his regiment without leave, yet, when the facts were understood, his name was taken off the black list, and he would have been recommended for a commission had he chosen to remain in the service. But he preferred to retire with the rank of "Sergeant," and to take up his duties as Squire of Crumpet's. He married, too, and his bride was one Sophie Gerard.

Guy, too, had his name restored to the Army List, but his health was hardly strong enough for active service. He lived with his father, and it was pleasant to see how joyous the Colonel was with his son's companionship. When Guy, however, was offered a Colonial appointment his father urged him to accept it, and take his place in the world of action. But Guy went for further advice to a better quarter. He rode over to a fine, new Elizabethan mansion that looked a deal older than Crumpet's. It was the house that my Lady Primrose had built for herself, after her husband's death. The house had taken two years to build, so you may judge that her ladyship had undergone a due period of widowhood when she told Guy that he had better stay at home, and take care of her and of his gallant old father—yes, and write the big book of travels that the world expected from him.

ACROSS THE FIELDS.

By HARRIETT STOCKALL.

ACROSS the fields I go at morn,
Amid glad sounds of spring-time born,
The throstle in the budding thorn,
The lark in heaven above;
White daisies spring about my feet,
The cowslip nods to primrose sweet,
Across the fields I go to greet
The lady of my love.

Across the fields I pace at noon,
The sun is fervent as in June;
My heart sings low a happy tune,
I see her drawing near.
She brings my life the promised bliss
That evermore I feared to miss;
Was ever spring-time fair as this?
Was ever love so dear?

Across the fields we pace at eve,
A thousand tender fancies weave,
And loth to turn, and loth to leave,
We watch the stars above.
Spring follows winter; after dole
Hath dawned the spring-time of the soul;
I greet, to make my spirit whole,
God's angel of true love!

A YOUNG MAN'S FANCY.

By H. F. ABELL.

CHAPTER I.

To commence a day's work with a twelve-mile walk over a hilly, country road, would not be deemed, even by strong and healthy men, conducive to subsequent alacrity and activity in the performance of heavy duties, and the Reverend John Pensher, Curate of the large Devonshire parish of Bishop's Tavy, was only lured to such a task by two considerations—duty, and the extreme beauty of the spring morning—for he was a pale, sickly man, and looked a far fitter object of sympathy and pity than did half the natives, who never hesitated to drag him out of bed, or demand that he should trudge three or four miles to comfort them in their imaginary ailments.

But, on this particular May morning, the Curate was not on parochial duty, although he was on his own particular service, and his poor, wan, colourless face almost beamed with happiness, as he stepped forth from his lodgings over the Bishop's Tavy baker's shop.

Early as it was—the church clock had just boomed six—there were cheery greetings sent out to the Curate from the cottage doorways as he went up the village street, for there was not man, woman, or child in the place who had not a kindly feeling for the poor, shabby, overworked, snubbed gentleman who for a pittance at which

many a butler would turn up his nose, had practically the care of the entire parish.

There was a Rector—the Reverend Cadwaller Marsden—a large, pompous snob, of a happily rare type of English clergymen, who was too rich and too idle to work himself, and who, therefore, kept a poor gentleman to do it for him; but John Pensher, for reasons which will presently appear, did not grumble, and made no attempt to “better” himself.

So he went on. Up and down red hills; along deep lanes, so deep between their overhanging hedges of leaf and blossom, that the sunshine rarely parched the wheel-ruts into dust; over village greens; now cutting across a sweet-scented field; now diving through a spinney of moaning fir-trees, until a majestic church tower and a picturesque jumble of tiled and thatched roofs proclaimed the town of Tavy Coombe.

Into the town, along the High Street, strode the Curate, nor paused until he came to a shady angle of the churchyard wall. Then he noticed that it yet wanted a quarter to eight o'clock, so he leaned against the brick-work and watched the busy birds in the great elm trees. Contemplation of the clear blue sky sent him off into an open-mouthed reverie, from which he was only awakened by a cheery laugh, and the greeting:

“Why, John!”

Then he dispersed his mental cobwebs, and lowered his eyes to the freshest and sweetest of girl's faces. It was broad daylight; but the churchyard angle was secluded, so he kissed that fair, laughing face, an attention which its owner seemed to accept quite as a matter of course.

“John,” said the girl, “you're put out. I can see that. Tell me what it is about. Has the Rector been at you again, or——” here she sank her voice to a whisper, “or are the socks out at heels again?”

“No, Naomi, no; it isn't that at all. It's about you.”

“About me! Why, what can it be about me?”

“About you and Charlie Marsden.”

The girl's face fell, and her fingers nervously played with the handle of the luncheon-basket she held. Then she said: “How did you find out about Charlie—I mean, Mr. Marsden?”

“Why—well, Naomi, I—well I have found out, and I am very sorry for it. Are you very fond of him, Naomi?”

“Yes, John.”

“I oughtn't to ask, I know, because I ought to know without asking that you wouldn't encourage the attentions of any young man without being fond of him; but I am very sorry for it.”

“Why, John?”

“Because—you mustn't mind me saying it—because I don't think he's worthy of you.”

The girl raised her large, brown eyes and looked at him. But he was looking at the ground and tracing a pattern in the red dust with the ferrule of his walking-stick.

“No,” he continued, “he's not worthy of you. I know he's just the sort of man that girls run after. He's a sailor; that's ever so many points in his favour; he's handsome; he's open-hearted and generous; but, Naomi, I love you so dearly that if I thought you were going to marry him I should cry my heart out.”

“That would be very silly, John. What is there bad in him?”

“Well, he's what they call a fast man. I don't mean that he's actually vicious; but—well, he's not the sort of man for you.”

“I am very sorry, John, to hear you speak of him like this; very sorry.”

“Don't you think, Naomi, that you could hint to him that the gulf between you and him—between a milliner's assistant and the heir of a wealthy, aristocratic clergyman—is so great that he should consider what he is doing? Can't you remind him that your position, as his wife, would necessarily be a very unpleasant one?”

“John, are you jealous of him?” said the girl in reply, or rather in order to avoid the necessity of replying directly.

“Perhaps I am,” answered Mr. Pensher.

“I came over this morning to tell you what I think about the matter, that's all, and to ask you to think over it. Why, that's eight o'clock striking, and I've not said half I intended to.”

“Yes, and I shall be fined if I'm five minutes late,” said Naomi, “so good-bye, John. God bless you. Good-bye!”

“Good-bye, Naomi; think over what I have said,” replied the Curate.

He watched the girl's light, active figure up the street, until it mingled with a crowd of other girls who were going into the millinery establishment of Raffle and Ruche. Then he heaved a deep sigh and addressed himself to his homeward six-mile trudge.

At the entrance to the village of Bishop's Tavy he was met by a handsome, sunburnt young man, mounted on a roan cob, who pulled up and greeted him.

"Morning, Pensher! The governor's in a fine old temper this morning, so look out for squalls. I say, old fellow, I'm coming in to smoke a pipe with you this afternoon. What time will suit you?"

"Well, Mr. Marsden, let me see," replied the Curate. "I have a busy day before me; but I shall be very glad to have a chat. Say four o'clock. I shall be glad to see you then."

"All right; four o'clock. I'll turn up to the minute," said the young man, and, touching his horse with the spur he cantered off.

As the Curate passed the Rectory gates the Reverend Cadwallader Marsden, red-faced, double-chinned, and portly, appeared.

"Oh, Pensher," he said, "you're just the man I wanted to see. I happened to go into the boys' library just now; the books are in sad disorder, so perhaps, if you have time to spare, you will catalogue them, and see that they are kept to their proper shelves. And Magnus O'Porto's daughter has been thrown from her horse, and I must go and make enquiries. Perhaps you will do my little round of poor visits this afternoon. I don't think there's anything more, except, er—let me see, to-day is Saturday—I may remain at O'Porto Hall over Sunday, so that you may as well be prepared to take the services to-morrow, and don't omit the afternoon address to the Confirmation candidates. Yes; that's all, I think."

"I will do my best," replied Mr. Pensher, "but I have not much time to get up a sermon for to-morrow, Mr. Marsden."

"You have all this evening, sir," said the Rector. "Really, you must do your best."

Mr. Pensher had a very hard struggle to get through his day's work in time to keep his appointment with Lieutenant Marsden, and at a quarter to four he felt very much more inclined to ease his aching head with a few minutes' rest, than to sustain a conversation with a lively young naval officer; but he knew that the interview would be an important one, and that, at all sacrifices, he must be prepared to bear his share in it. So he received the young officer with a smiling face, and moved the only easy-chair in the room towards him.

"Rather seedy diggings these of yours, Pensher," said Charlie Marsden. "The old

man's precious hard on you, I think, and I have a jolly good mind to talk to him about it."

Mr. Pensher smiled deprecatingly.

A short pause ensued, during which the Curate guessed that his visitor was weighing in his mind how he should best approach the subject uppermost in it. At length he said:

"Look here, Pensher, old fellow. I haven't a blessed friend in the world to whom I can talk about my bothers but you, and I've come here to ask your advice. I'm in a hole. Yes; I'm in a regular hole. No; it isn't debt. I'm pretty clear of that, barring a trifle or two here and there. But I'm in love. There! And the worst of it is, I don't see how it will end. Of course, you know Ruffle and Ruche's shop in Tavy Coombe. Yes? Well, there's a girl there, Naomi Miller; she's a perfect lady in every sense of the word, and she's awfully fond of me. But, you see, she's in a milliner's shop; and, although I don't think any the worse of her for that, the world wouldn't look at it as I do—I mean the world in which I have the misfortune to move. Well, of course, you know what my father is, and you can bet your bottom dollar that he'd just as soon think of asking old Redward the sexton to dine at the Hall, as of tolerating a marriage between his son and a milliner's show-girl."

"Have you compromised yourself in any way, Mr. Marsden?" asked the Curate.

"Well," replied the Lieutenant, "in a way I have, and in a way I have not. Nothing but words have ever been exchanged between us—I mean no vows, or rings, or letters, or that sort of thing. I meet her whenever I have the chance, and she is always glad to see me. If you could only see her, Pensher, at any rate you'd say I had good taste. Such eyes, and hair! Sweetest of tempers, and gentlest of manners. But what on earth am I to do?"

"Well, Mr. Marsden," replied the Curate, "I'm a very bad one to give advice in this sort of thing. But, as you have been pleased to confide in me, I suppose you expect me to give a frank opinion. So I'll begin by asking you a question."

"Fire away!" said the young officer.

"Don't you think that, by getting her to reciprocate the love you have for her, you are placing her in a false position? Of course, I know your father's strong

opinions upon all matters of class distinction."

"Yes; or he wouldn't treat you like a servant because you happen to be poor. Go on."

"Well, suppose you—you married Miss Miller. None of your people would acknowledge her. You might even be cut adrift by them. From the nature of your profession you would be obliged to leave her at home. Wouldn't her life be a very unhappy one?"

"Ye-es, I suppose it would; and I've thought of all that. And that's why I've come to you for advice."

"Well, I must speak plainly—I am sorry for it."

"Why?"

"Because, I agree with you, that—for the present, at any rate—nothing can come of it."

"You acknowledge, however, that, as a girl, she is fit to be any man's wife?"

"Certainly, certainly," said the Curate, with such warmth that the young officer looked at him, and said:

"Perhaps you know her by sight?"

Mr. Pensher was conscious that he looked confused, and almost guilty, as he replied in the affirmative.

Lieutenant Marsden was keeping his eyes fixed on him, and the poor Curate felt that an earthquake at that moment would have been almost a welcome incident.

"Then," continued Marsden, "your candid and unbiassed advice is, that I should break off all communication with Miss Miller."

"For the present—yes," replied the Curate.

"What do you mean by for the present, Pensher?"

"Well, Mr. Marsden, I mean—if you still wish me to speak plainly—until you are in a position to fly in the face of your father's prejudices, and act independently."

"That means never. I can't keep myself on my pay as a Lieutenant, much less keep a wife. And I know very well that if the governor knew that I was going to marry a girl out of a milliner's shop, he would cut me clean out of his will, and refuse to help me with a shilling."

The conversation then turned into another channel, and presently, much to the Curate's relief, his visitor took his leave. Mr. Pensher soon discovered that the impression made upon the young man by his counsel had not been favourable. Hitherto

there had existed between them as much intimacy as could reasonably be expected to exist between a poor, humble-minded Curate, and a high-spirited, society and sport-loving young scion of wealth; but this was soon exchanged for coldness on the part of the young officer.

For some days Mr. Pensher could find no opportunity of getting over to Tavy Coombe to see Naomi, much as he wished to in order to report the interview above described, and it was only by sacrificing some time that he had intended to devote to the poor that he contrived to walk over and arrive opposite Ruffle and Ruche's shop just as the young women were leaving for the day.

Naomi saw him, and, in obedience to a gesture, followed him out into the pleasant meadows which surrounded the old town. Here she joined him, and in the beautiful calm of the May evening they sauntered slowly along in deep conversation for more than an hour, until night came down, and the Curate was reminded that his own day's toil was very far from being accomplished.

They had turned on their way back: the Curate had almost persuaded the girl to ask her lover to discontinue his attentions at any rate for the present, and they were arm in arm when a figure passed them, paused when a few paces in advance, looked back, and continued its course towards the town.

The figure was that of Lieutenant Marsden, and there was yet sufficient light for the Curate and the girl on his arm to make out that his face was contorted with anger.

"I am afraid ill will come of this, Naomi," said the Curate.

"Then, there is only one thing to be done, John," replied the girl: "we must proclaim the secret."

Never before had the six miles of pleasant country, through which the road from Tavy Coombe to Bishop's Tavy ran, appeared so weary and unattractive as it did upon this evening to the Curate. A presentiment of coming evil hung over him; blinded his eyes to the glorious star-lit sky; soured the sweet night-odour of dew-steeped fields and vegetation; and made him almost fear to enter the village. This nervous depression, working upon a wearied body and a perplexed and confused mind, made him so unwell, that upon reaching his lodgings, he was obliged to go at once to bed, after having des-

patched a message to the Rectory to the effect that he was utterly unable to take the usual evening class.

He knew Lieutenant Marsden to be a man of violent temper, and not very scrupulous in the way he gave vent to it, and he felt sure that the evening's incident would not be without terrible results. However, he made up his mind to the course he would pursue and awaited the outcome of events.

Next morning a message from the Rectory arrived, requesting Mr. Pensher's attendance there without delay. The poor man, who had tossed in sleepless agony during the long night, felt that the storm was about to burst, and obeyed the message.

He found the Rector in his study, the ugliness of his fat, sensual face accentuated by a deep frown on his brow.

"Mr. Pensher," he said in a strident, judicial tone, "I am informed that you have been in the habit during some months of carrying on a clandestine acquaintance with a young person engaged in a milliner's shop, in Tavy Coombe. For a clergyman to be seen in the company of a common bonnet-maker's apprentice——"

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted the Curate, "she is neither a bonnet-maker's apprentice, nor is she common. Her father is——"

"Do not bandy words with me, sir; I do not make accusations without having been at the trouble to verify them," said the Rector, sternly. "It is enough that you have been seen in the close company of a shop-girl. When I engaged your services here, I understood that you were fitted to set an example to the poorer folk around you."

"I have done my best, sir," urged the Curate. "I want to explain—I must explain—if not to you, at any rate to your son."

"My son has received orders for foreign service, and has gone up to town," said the Rector. "But I have neither time nor inclination to listen to explanations. Here is your salary for the year. You are at liberty to go as soon as you think fit."

Mr. Pensher was a gentleman, and had the courage of a gentleman.

"Mr. Marsden," he said, in a voice broken as much with anger as emotion, "as you decline to do me justice, I shall say no more, except that you, and he who has prompted you to do me this great wrong, will live to repent it. Good morning, sir."

That day the village of Bishop's Tavy and the town of Tavy Coombe were both scenes of strange excitement.

In the former it somehow or other leaked out that the Curate had had a difference with the Rector, and was about to leave the place. The sturdy West-country folk did not take the trouble to sift the matter: if there had been a difference the Rector was wrong and the Curate was right, and there was an end of it, so far as discussion went, but by no means as regards action.

Sympathising well-wishers thronged the baker's shop; presents came in an unbroken stream—bushels of apples, kegs of cider, pounds of butter and cream, hams and sides of bacon, eggs, and vegetables. Squire Champarnoune, who hated the Rector, sent his own carriage to convey John Pensher to the railway-station four miles off; the Squire himself was at the station, and commended him to the care of some relations in London, whilst he handed him his ticket, and with it a purse of money, "collected," as he said, "in a hurry by some well-wishers."

Sorrow at his departure was as genuine as it was general, and the poor fellow in vain tried to express his appreciation and thanks to the crowd, which alternately cheered and cried as he steamed out of the station.

In the establishment of Ruffle and Ruche, in Tavy Coombe town, it was rumoured that "Miss Naomi," as she was called, had resigned her situation, and was about to go to London. What John Pensher was to Bishop's Tavy, Naomi was in the milliner's shop—everybody's friend, sympathiser, well-wisher, and comforter; and if she left in a less triumphal style than the Curate had left his cure, it was only because her circle of acquaintance was smaller.

But she went away laden with presents and good wishes, and her friends said of her as John Pensher's flock had said of him, "that it would be very long before they saw her like again."

CHAPTER II.

FOUR years later, on a May night, Her Majesty's gunboat "Dapper" was steaming slowly and quietly up the mighty river Yangtse in North China.

It was two hours before midnight; the gunboat was showing no lights, every man and boy on board were on the alert and ready for instant action, and in com-

mand of all was Commander Charles Marsden.

They were on no make-believe expedition. Three weeks before the British steamer "Cootherstone," on her voyage to Hankow, had been wrecked on Silver Island, and only one man had escaped to tell the tale—how they had been set on by Taiwan pirates, and all but himself murdered. The Chinese authorities at Shanghai either could or would not move in the matter, pleading that after a bad rice harvest it was as much as they could do to keep people properly subject to them in order, without going further afield to punish a lawless race of men over whom they had no jurisdiction. So the British Admiral took the affair into his own hands. Information was gained that the pirates, under the command of one Lai Ting, a rascal of the deepest dye, had landed on the bank of the river opposite Chinkiang, and were proceeding southwards, and Commander Marsden, as a dashing and resolute officer, was selected for the duty of pursuing and chastising them.

"Lights on the port bow," was the word passed along from the look-out forward after the vessel had proceeded some distance without a sign of human life being visible on either bank.

The Commander telegraphed "slow" to the engine-room, and gave the order "stand by to lower away the boats," at the same time that the vessel's helm was put down hard a port.

The lights—quite a procession of them—were soon plainly visible. Then a blue rocket rose into the air, and was immediately answered by another at some distance, so that the British officers at once guessed that the lights were not those of the peasantry.

"Lower away the boats," sung out the Commander as the gunboat swung round into deep water within a couple of hundred yards of the shore, and in less than half-an-hour a hundred and fifty marines and blue-jackets were landed amongst the tall grass which fringed the steep clay banks of the yellow river, the Commander himself at their head. Each man had forty rounds of ammunition, three days' provisions in his haversack, and his controlled over his shoulder—not exactly the easiest equipment for pursuit over ground sodden with the incessant rain of weeks, after an enemy familiar with every inch of the country.

However, in extended order and in ab-

solute silence the men ascended to the top of the bank, and reconnoitred as well as they could through a drizzling rain. Not a sound was heard, not a light was seen, so that it was evident that the enemy had been alarmed and had decamped.

Presently a peasant woman with a child on her back came up crying bitterly, and made the officers understand that the pirates, murdering and destroying as they went, had taken the path along the canal towards Chang-Chow, that they were very strong in numbers, well-armed, and had started an hour previously.

A council of war was held at which it was decided that the force should march along the canal until daybreak, remain during the day in one of the villages which dotted its course, so that the pirates, lulled into a sense of security by the non-appearance of a pursuing force, might take matters easily, and enable the British force to come up with them after nightfall.

This plan was carried out, and soon after daybreak the British contingent arrived at a large, miserable village, grouped around a Pagoda, where the inhabitants informed the Commander that Lai Ting's troops were but a four hours' march in front.

Whilst the men, wearied with their long night's march in the rain, were making the best of such accommodation as the village afforded, Marsden and his two Lieutenants ascended the Pagoda to reconnoitre.

"Hunter," said Marsden to the First Lieutenant, as he swept the horizon with his spy-glass, "you see that Pagoda near that village, amongst the trees—well, isn't that a British ensign flying from it?"

"Of course it is, sir," replied the officer.

"That's a rum thing. Who on earth can be there?"

"Why, sir, I tell you what it is. Those rascals are sporting the 'Cootherstone's' flag as a trophy. There are none of our people about these parts, unless they're missionaries."

"If they are missionaries they will have a rough time of it with Lai Ting and his lambs," said Marsden.

Directly after sunset the expedition started again on their course, towards the next village, accompanied by a Pidgin—English-speaking native—as guide.

As they stumbled along the canal bank, they came across frequent evidences of the pirates' progress; here, couple of dead bodies, slashed and disfigured beyond recognition; there a fat Chinaman, tied up

by his thumbs to a bamboo branch; drinking vessels, discarded shoes, broken weapons, and various odds and ends.

By midnight they were close to the thick bamboo plantation by which the village was surrounded, and a couple of blue-jackets, who were detached to reconnoitre, reported that the "lambs" were carousing in the village, and that some of them had on articles of European wearing apparel.

So the plan of attack was determined upon. Half the force of a hundred and fifty men would form the main attack, whilst the other half would be divided into two flanking bodies of equal strength; for, brave as a Chinaman may be, with plenty of "samshiu" in him, flanking movements never fail to demoralise him.

The flanking parties started, it being arranged that not until the rocket of one should be answered by the other should the attack commence.

The rockets flew up into the black sky, and, with a cheer that might have been heard at Nanking, blue-jackets and "jollies" rushed into the thicket.

The difficulties of this bamboo thicket enabled the pirates, who had heard the British cheer, to fly to arms, so that when the blue-jackets and marines got into the village, they found it a veritable hornets' nest.

The pirates knew that they need expect no quarter; and so, mad with despair and "samshiu," and confident in their tremendous numerical superiority, they fought like fiends.

But for aught the "Dappers" cared, the pirates might have been five thousand instead of five hundred. After the first volley there was very little firing, and it became an affair of steel against steel, cutlass and bayonet against two-handed sword, lance and halberd, so that all military formation was very soon lost, and the struggle resolved itself into what a blue-jacket afterwards described as a "bloomin' mess, where you went in slap anywhere, and at anythink."

Half-a-dozen times it looked as if sheer weight would turn the scale, and the British were borne backwards, but half-a-dozen times they regained lost ground. In the midst of the cheering, and howling, and cursing, and laughter, the village caught fire, and the terrible character of the struggle was intensified by the lurid glare of the leaping flames; but the illumination aided the assailants, whilst it

baffled the running, and creeping, and hiding policy of the pirates, who very soon saw that they were no match for the former in the open, and dodged about the houses, and in the thicket.

In the confusion, Marsden and a couple of Marines fell into one of these traps and found themselves cut off from the remainder of their comrades, and surrounded amongst the bamboos by a score of yelling, half-drunk fiends.

A shower of ghastly sword blows soon laid the two Marines low, and nothing but a miracle seemed likely to save the Commander, who was already wounded in the sword-arm.

Another slash brought him on one knee, and half-a-dozen blades were raised to dispatch him, when a couple of revolver reports rang out; two of his assailants fell stone-dead, a third raised his sword with both hands, Marsden saw it shine in the light of the flames high above his head, then a dark body seemed to be hurled between him and it, he felt a deluge of warm blood over him, and sank senseless.

When he came to himself again the voice of battle had ceased, and the Irish surgeon of the "Dapper" was kneeling at his side, pouring brandy between his lips.

"Macnamara," said Marsden faintly, "some fellow saved my life. Who was it?"

"Shure, and it must have been a Chaney-man, for, barring these two poor kilt jollies, there's divil an European near ye now, Commander."

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Faint and dizzy as he was, Marsden crawled to where the clergyman lay.

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"In the Pagoda there—Mr. Marsden—Naomi's there—I am a missionary—you see

the old flag flying—all the rest ran away when the fight began—O my head! my head!—Mr. Marsden—I must see her.” Then he fainted away.

The surgeon soon reappeared with half-a-dozen blue-jackets, who, after the missionary's terrible wounds had been temporarily bound up, improvised stretchers with their rifles and carried the two men to the Pagoda.

There, at the entrance, stood Naomi. When she saw the little procession approach, she ran forward, and, recognising John Pensher, apparently lifeless on one of them, burst into an agony of grief.

The two wounded men were laid side by side, on the basement floor, which seemed to be fitted up as a school-room. Naomi, in her concern at John Pensher's condition, had hardly noticed the Commander; but now that she saw him pale and bloody, and recognised the lover of old days, she started and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

“Commander,” whispered the surgeon in Marsden's ear, “if you have anything to say be sharp. You're right enough, but this poor chap can't last long.”

The young officer leaned over to John Pensher's mattress and said:

“Pensher, old fellow, I did you a great wrong long ago. Tell me you forgive me for it and what I can do to repay you for what you have done to-night.”

The dying man raised his poor dim eyes and whispered:

“Forgive you, Mr. Marsden? Of course I do, and—and will you take care of her?”

“Of Naomi—your wife?”

“Of Naomi—my sister.”

“Naomi—your sister! Pensher—speak—tell me.”

“Heaven bless you! Heaven bless you—good-bye! Surgeon, thank you—good—”

Here the poor fellow's voice quite failed him. Naomi took his hand and he pressed it feebly. For a few moments he breathed faintly, then his face turned, and the gallant, noble-hearted soldier of Christ was dead.

When the girl's first outburst of grief had subsided, Charlie Marsden said to her:

“Naomi, tell me about this, explain what your poor brother said just now.”

“It is very simple,” replied the girl.

“We were both very poor, and we were all in the world to each other. So when poor John was appointed your father's Curate, I determined, so as to be near him,

to get a situation in a shop, for his stipend could not keep us both, and I was taken on by Ruffle and Ruche. Then we considered that strange things might be said if it were known that the Curate of Bishop's Tavy had a sister who was a shop-girl, and we decided that I should drop my real name.”

“O Naomi!” exclaimed the young officer, “if he had but told me this at the time, this would never have happened.”

“He wanted to explain it to your father on that fatal morning, but Mr. Marsden would not hear him, and you had gone to London,” said the girl.

“Naomi, he saved my life to-night, and he has committed you to my charge,” said the Commander. “And you will never leave that charge?”

“Not unless it prove too heavy for you, Charlie,” replied Naomi.

They buried John Pensher on the spot where he had received his death-wound, with full military honours, and the villagers of Chang-Chow still point out the humble mound and stone which mark the last resting-place of the good “joss man,” who had so nobly ended a career amongst them which had been long enough to make him as much beloved as he had been amongst the peasants of the far-away Devonshire village.

MRS. SILVERTON'S GARDEN-PARTY.

BY PAUL CHALLINOR.

THREE pretty girls leant over the garden gate and looked out for the postman. The postman, hobbling leisurely along on the shady side of the lane, looked out for the three pretty girls. When he caught sight of them he began to grope in his wallet for the Daisy Lawn letters, the last he had to deliver, except an unimportant circular about phosphate, or oil-cake for White Chimney Farm, half-a-mile further on.

“There's Miss 'Livia and the others, and another still. Now, who's she? Two more staying in the house. No one as I knows. Mornin', miss. Heavy mail to-day,” and he touched his hat to “Miss 'Livia and her sisters,” as others besides the postman were wont to style the three Miss Silvertons.

“Good morning, Bibby. Hand it over!” and Miss Olivia, a handsome, black-haired lass, held out her smart tennis apron to

receive the great double handful of letters; but Bibby had ways of his own.

"Miss Dora Montresor," he demanded, holding up an envelope to his blinking old eyes. "Who's that?"

The fourth young lady stepped forward and claimed it.

"Now, 'Miss Margery Vigora.' Who may that be?"

"My aunt," replied Miss Montresor, a smile gathering round her lips.

"There's her lot, then. Now, 'Lady Montresor.' That'll be your ma, miss, eh?"

"No. Another aunt."

"Ah, and all staying here, ain't you?" and Bibby's face cleared, and he drew a long satisfied breath.

"Go on, Bibby. Ask something else," laughed Miss Olivia.

"I never asks uncalled-for questions," returned Bibby in a tone of calm dignity. "Here's fourteen letters for madam, and I never stoops to enquire what's inside 'em, do I?" He handed them over the gate, and then dropping into a confidential tone. "Is it a party, miss? Ain't there something I or my missis can do?"

"Of course you can. Do we ever give one without you? Are you going on to White Chimney Farm?"

"If so be as you've an errand there, miss; otherwise, I ain't a going a-tramping there for this, I know," contemptuously displaying the flimsy circular in the half-penny wrapper.

"You may tell them to keep all the cream they can spare for Wednesday, and say that I shall want four pounds of fresh butter and two score of eggs."

"I'd better see if their 'Liza Ann's at home, miss. She do hand tea and coffee uncommonly genteel."

"Very good. Tell whoever comes out with the mail-cart on Wednesday, that he must bring a basket from the confectioner's, and another from the hotel, and we want them early. You can keep a look-out to-morrow on your round, and order any raspberries or strawberries you see worth picking, and—and—well, I think that's all; except that I want to speak to your brother Ben to-night."

"To tell him about mowing and rolling, miss? Yes, I'll send him, but"—in a tone of deep feeling—"you won't go and trust the marking of the courts to him, will you now? I couldn't a-bear to see it." Olivia nodded reassuringly, and he prepared to start, but suddenly pulled up again. "Beg pardon, miss, but haven't you been

asking too many? Fourteen of them notes there, and ten last evening. Have you counted us, Miss 'Livia? You can't tennis more than eight you know, nor dance more than twenty, for we've tried it."

Olivia looked malicious.

"Dear, dear! Now, why didn't I consult you first, Bibby? We've asked all the county."

"Oh lor!"

"And half the camp."

Bibby's face grew blank with consternation.

"Miss 'Livia, Miss 'Livia! What on earth was you thinking of?" he cried in tones of such utter dismay that it would have been cruel to torment him longer.

"It's all right. Sir Piers Chichele is going to lend us Lonelands for the day."

"No, miss? Is he really? But"—his relief dashed—"he will make you pay handsome for the accommodation. No? Won't he, then? Well; madam she do beat everything for managing. You'll dance in the Banketing Hall?"

"Well, no; in fact we are not to enter the house at all, except the lower rooms. Sir Piers makes a point of it."

"Ah, I knows him. Then he'll just let you get his tennis grounds into order for him, and roll his drive. But we'll do it handsome, Miss 'Livia. We'll have a marquee——"

"And a military band from the camp; and the messman to do the refreshments——"

"Ho! ho!" Bibby fairly guffawed with delight and relief. "Now, if all those officer gents do but come, Miss 'Livia"—dropping his voice—"I may mention that there's two young ladies visiting at the Rectory. If you've plenty without 'em—why you've no call to remember as I've named it, miss."

Then, at last, he went on his way rejoicing.

The girls laughed as they turned towards the house.

"Is that the way you get up your parties at home, Dora?" asked one of "Olivia's sisters." (Very few people ever arrived at any more definite designation. They were that, or "the Silvertown girls"—either Lucy or Lily, it did not matter which.)

Miss Montresor laughed again.

"We never have half the fun. Our dinners are sad and solemn functions. Three weeks beforehand I know which of three old gentlemen I shall have to amuse for three mortal hours: one is deaf,

one is greedy, and one ill-tempered; but they are all great personages, and the only ones good enough for me in the place. I daren't speak to anybody else."

"What it is to be a great heiress! I wonder you stand it," cried Lucy or Lily.

"I shall be twenty-one next month," said Miss Dora demurely.

She did not look it. A small childish creature with a delicately-tinted face, and dusky eyes, and somewhat the air of a frightened little mouse peeping out at the wide world. She was as exquisitely pretty in a small, over-finished way, as her gown and her ornaments—all too costly for honest every-day wear. She was a good little lass, though, at heart, mightily enjoying, in a timid, half guilty way, this first holiday of her life, when she was actually trusted, for an hour at a time, out of sight of her two anxious guardian aunts.

"Look at the Fanshaws' crest," said Lily to Lucy. "I do hope the dear Colonel is coming."

"And whose is this big, square envelope? I don't think it is a camp letter."

"Do you think it is Mr. Vivian's answer?" asked little Miss Montresor, in an elaborately careless tone.

"Not it. He writes a regular Oxford hand. Besides he'd send a school-boy with it—"

"Or bring it himself." Lucy tittered, and Lily tittered too, while Olivia delivered a crushing glance over her shoulder at them.

They had reached the open French window of a pretty morning-room. Within were three elderly ladies. One writing, one reading the "Court Journal," one laying down the law.

"We have in all things to consider our niece Dora's most exceptional position," she was saying.

"Dora, dear!" cried the lady with the "Court Journal" in a tone of dismay. "No parasol! In this terrible glare! And your delicate Montresor complexion. And your shoes, my love—your shoes! Did you go on the grass? Is your forehead hot? Hadn't you better go and lie down for a little, and get Baker to put some 'Eau des Fées' on it?"

"I'm all right, Aunt Juliet, thank you. Here are your letters. And here are yours, Aunt Margery."

The other girls crowded round Mrs. Silverton's writing-table, opening envelopes, reckoning names, chattering, exclaiming.

"We may safely discover those Rectory

visitors," said Olivia. "All the men we have asked are coming—Guards, Rifle Brigade, Engineers. Half the Seventeenth will be here. Such good-looking fellows, and such beautiful dancers. You will have a splendid choice of partners, Dora."

Dora's little wrist was tightly imprisoned in Aunt Margery's bony knuckles, and Aunt Margery was making a few remarks in a sharp whisper, that had set Dora's pretty ears burning.

"One moment, dear Mrs. Silverton," she continued aloud. "Pray allow me to finish what I was saying when the girls came in. We do not wish to do anything rude, of course; but Lady Montresor and I have agreed that there must be no misunderstanding on one point. Considering our dear Dora's most exceptional position, I am sure that you and the dear girls will excuse me for requesting that there shall be no introductions made to her without our previous consent."

"I am sure she need not be afraid of meeting any one objectionable at my house." Gentle Mrs. Silverton spoke with unwon'ted sharpness, her cheeks growing pink.

Miss Vigors continued, unheeding: "Lady Montresor and I have been consulting whether it would not be better for her neither to dance nor to play tennis on such an occasion. If she just shows herself with us, it will be as much as your friends will be likely to expect."

There was an outburst of protest from the girls. Miss Vigors calmed it down with her eye-glass and proceeded: "But, rather than appear in the least degree ungracious, we have determined to let her share—with precaution—in the day's amusements. You expect Lord Dobbington, I think. In his position as Lord-Lieutenant he will naturally expect to be the first noticed by us. Dora, you must dance the first quadrille with Lord Dobbington."

Lily and Lucy exchanged a grimace.

"The Bishop, of course, comes next in order of precedence—"

"Which may he do—dance or play tennis with her?" asked Mrs. Silverton with an undertone of laughter.

"I—ah—well, I don't suppose he does either," admitted Miss Vigors. "Still, I should wish to show some respect to the Church. Perhaps his son—"

"Or his nephew," put in Olivia. "He would feel the compliment just as much if Dora might play with his nephew."

She darted an irate glance at Lucy and Lily, who seemed to perceive some occult jest in her words, while Miss Vigors pursued:

"General Sir George Melville is an old friend of the family. I shall be happy to renew the acquaintance. You may accept any attention he offers you—tea, or an ice, Dora; and you may go for a short turn in the grounds with any one of the three I have mentioned. Then, with a little polite notice of Mrs. Silvertown's lady friends, you will have amply fulfilled your duty to Society, and we may withdraw. There are a few more details to arrange, but I shall have thought them out by Wednesday."

With this she gathered up her eyeglasses and her lace shawl and swept away, followed by Dora, who looked unaccountably dejected at the brilliant programmesketched out for her.

Sleepy, good-humoured Lady Montresor rose, too, reluctantly.

"You had better come and lie down in my room, Dora, and you shall see the 'Court Journal'—or, no; I will lie down, and you shall read to me.

But Dora looked uncheered.

"Olivia," said Mrs. Silvertown warningly, as the door closed upon them, "don't carry that little joke about the Bishop's nephew too far. Miss Vigors hasn't the least idea that you mean Mr. Vivian; and you know how disagreeable she made herself about his joining you in that walk yesterday."

"Dora didn't make herself disagreeable," suggested Olivia. "And he has joined us in a good many walks before. One is always meeting the Curate about in the country. Why not? He's far too good for Dora, I'm sure. It's all very well for that impertinent old woman to behave as if she were a royal Princess, but— Good Heavens, mother! what is it?"

Mrs. Silvertown had opened the last envelope, and was standing staring at its enclosure. Then, with a tragic gesture she sank into her chair, prostrate. "The Dodds!" she feebly gasped.

"Accepted!" shrieked the girls. "But they are safe at Eastbourne?"

"Coming home on purpose! Read it! The four girls, and no papa or mamma."

"All four of them—Chicky and Chummy, Dotty and Ducky," murmured Olivia in consternation.

"I couldn't help it. I did my very best to make sure they couldn't come," bewailed the mother. "It's too much, I

suppose, to hope that they may behave themselves for once!" And she looked from face to face in vain appeal for encouragement.

Lucy shook her head ominously.

"Chummy pinned a cracker picture on Lord Dobbington's back at the Hunt Ball."

"And Chicky stitched Algy Nevil's coat-tail to Miss de Vismes' sash," responded Lily.

"They are never to be asked to a Camp Ball again, Colonel Fanshawe says," from Lucy.

"That was because Dotty bet that she would kiss that shy Singleton boy under the mistletoe."

"Be quiet, girls. You're as bad as a horrid Greek Chorus. Cheer up, mother! I'll keep them quiet, or know the reason why. They shan't begin their pranks, at any rate, till those good old ladies have got safely away with their Dora."

Mrs. Silvertown shook her head, uncomfortable.

"My dears, I have had from the first a feeling that something dreadful is going to happen. I don't know what; but I feel sure of it. Some great disaster is on its way that shall make us live to regret that we ever gave this garden-party."

Something did happen on the Wednesday morning, and, in accordance with all previous experience, it was the unforeseen. The thunderstorm for which Mrs. Silvertown had confidently looked out, failed to appear. No untimely apologies came from any desirable guests, no contretemps occurred in the preparations, nothing worse arrived than two orange envelopes containing two pink telegrams for Lady Montresor and Miss Vigors at luncheon time.

"From Mr. Pollexfen, our family solicitor," explained Lady Montresor with importance.

"Coming down—four-forty—on important business."

"Dear, dear! how provoking of him!" exclaimed Mrs. Silvertown. "What shall you do? Must you stay and see him?"

"I do not know that you need, Juliet, but, as dear Dora's mother's sister, I shall be required," said Miss Vigors, who never forgot that the money came from the Vigors' side.

"Indeed, Margery, as representative of the head of the family, my presence will be indispensable!" protested Juliet.

"Then I had better stay at home, too," put in Dora meekly.

But the aunts looked at one another dubiously. Mr. Pollexfen had an unfortunate habit of joking the heiress on her complete independence after the birthday next month, which neither lady considered judicious.

"If Sir Piers had not made that shabby stipulation about the house, Mr. Pollexfen might have come to Lonelands," suggested Lucy or Lily fruitlessly.

"I cannot permit dear Dora, in her position, to go anywhere without me yet," pronounced Miss Vigors.

"Society will think it odd if I am not with her," amended Lady Montresor.

Backwards and forwards across the table the vexed question was bandied like a shuttlecock, till the judicious Olivia interposed with her wonted tact.

If Lady Montresor took Dora to Lonelands and superintended the introductions while Miss Vigors got the law business in trim—and the two were to change places later on—Miss Vigors could bring Dora away when she thought it desirable, and Lady Montresor could give her final approval to the legal arrangements.

Lady Montresor, having asserted her importance as Dora's guardian, was content. Aunt Margery fumed.

"If I could trust Juliet! But she is so absurdly yielding; she will let that child do exactly as she pleases. They must on no account stay late if I should be detained. Dear Mrs. Silvertton, you will please see to it. You will wear your last Paris frock, Dora."

"Oh, aunt! That gold-beaded thing! Why I can neither dance, nor walk, nor tennis in it!"

"And you will remember. Lord Dobbington, the Bishop, Sir George Melville; nobody else."

But Dora and Juliet had disappeared and shut the door behind them.

Six o'clock struck as the carriage with Aunt Margery drove through the gates of Lonelands. The house looked grim and inhospitable enough, with its door boarded up and its blank windows. Sacks of lime and sand, and piles of planks disfigured the portico; but the workmen had disappeared, engaged to a man in the observance of a local holiday, dimly connected with a saint and a hiring fair in the next parish.

Passing the deserted house, the carriage drew up at the head of a flight of dilapidated stone steps, leading down between

moss-grown urns on shattered pedestals to the grounds beyond.

Miss Vigors descended and advanced. Following a broad path, marked with many footprints through the shrubbery, now a wilderness, she emerged on the old archery ground, by Bibby's exertions transformed into a very fair tennis-lawn. A tournament was in progress, and besides the players a fair gathering of spectators watched the play; but amongst them all shone no glitter of Dora's brown and gold. Chick, Dotty, and Ducky Dodd were prominent: tall, well-set-up girls, with nice pink cheeks and innocent blue eyes, dressed always in the perfection of fresh simplicity, affecting cotton frocks and simple straw hats perched upon their abundant coils of pretty hair. They dressed in pairs—two were in white and blue, two in cream and scarlet. Of these last, one was missing, Chummy, the worst and wickedest.

Aunt Margery turned her back on the tennis-ground and followed the strains of the Seventeenth Band till she came in sight of the marquee, standing out bravely with its fluttering flags against the dark background of firs. Its striped sides were fastened back, and round and round in vain search prowled Miss Vigors. No Dora!

A gleam of hope crossed her mind. Had they started for home? Or had Juliet had the sense to keep her close beside her? Vain imaginings. There, under the spreading beeches, within easy reach of the refreshment table, a covey of chaperons had settled down, and, in the midst, a plate of iced strawberries and cream on her lap, a tumbler of champagne in her hand and a contented smile on her lips, sat Lady Montresor, just as if there were no Dora in the world.

"Where is she?" demanded a stern voice in Lady Montresor's ear, making her jump and spill her cream over her grey "moiré."

"Margery! Good gracious, how you startled me! Dora! Haven't you seen her? She's somewhere, I'm sure."

"I suppose she is. What has she been doing?"

Thus called to account, Lady Montresor looked vaguely around, then smiling in a propitiatory fashion, began: "Of course, we remembered all you told us, but Lord Dobbington hasn't come, so Lord Sholto Carnegie—the Duke's son, you know—was introduced and danced—no, took her on the water, I think."

"Which is he?" Aunt Margery's falcon glance swept the horizon. "Not that!"

Lady Montresor's eyes followed hers to the margin of the pretty lakelet where, among the rushes, a punt was rocking and splashing, propelled by a young man in a fearful and wonderful striped-flannel garb, with a fancy straw hat like the roof of a Chinese pagoda without the bells, perched on the top of his little red head. A young lady—not Dora—was making strenuous efforts to swamp the craft by clutching at the bull-rushes, with much loud-voiced chaff and merriment—Miss Chummy Dodd, in fact.

"I—think it is," admitted the guilty Juliet. "He is eccentric, but so was his dear father. Then—the Bishop was the next. He couldn't dance, you know; but his nephew took her to get an ice—Mr. Vivian, the nice young Curate, you know! And then Sir George—"

"Introduced his nephew, I suppose, or his aide-de-camp, or anybody! Juliet, have you taken leave of your senses! No, don't trouble yourself to come and find her. I will do that, and relieve you of the charge of her for the rest of the afternoon," and with a glance of withering scorn she turned aside, her teeth set, her parasol clutched viciously, and her whole aspect so fell, that Olivia, meeting her, quailed before her.

"She has found out the Bishop's nephew," she thought. "And they are in the rose-garden together this minute!"

But Olivia's presence of mind was never far to seek. "So glad you have come, Miss Vigors. Allow me to introduce Lord Dobbington. We want to find Dora. She was here with the Bishop a minute ago."

A rosy little gentleman in a flaxen wig, and the neatest of tiny, shiny boots bowed low and tripped beside them over the mossy sward, through the tangled fragrance of the neglected garden.

The house of Lonelands was built on the side of the hill, sloping so steeply to the lake that the great hall was entered from the front, on the ground level, and ended at the back, over a basement storey. Sir Piers made the repairs going on in the hall and reception rooms his excuse for excluding Mrs. Silvertton's guests, but this basement story, opening from the garden, she chose to consider as out of the bargain, and had it thrown open as a refuge against possible wet weather; saving her conscience by barricading off all access to the upper regions.

"I remember this place," said Lord Dobbington, peering round with his gold eye-glass. "Queer old rooms. Chichele turned them into a museum—fossils—Roman pots, you know. Most interesting! Shall we look round?"

"Delighted," murmured Miss Vigors, gradually regaining her equanimity. "Dora will be charmed. There she is!"

There she was, and Olivia trembled. A terrace and broken-down landing-place bordered the lake just below them. A young lady stood smiling dreamily, as she gazed over the water, a tall gentleman bent down very close to the lady's ear. His dress was clerical, but distinctly not episcopal; and the hat and gaiters Miss Vigors looked to see were discreetly promenading out of earshot, some yards away.

At the same moment the punt rounded the corner.

"Vivian, ahoy!" sang out the lady in red and cream. "We're going to do music on the water. Sholto's got his bones, and I have my banjo. You shall warble— You don't? Stuff! Don't I hear you every Sunday? Well, I'll teach you. Would you like the tambourine, Miss Montresor, or shall we offer it to the Bishop?"

She sprang to shore with a lively shriek and mighty display of red stockings, and raced helter-skelter towards the terrace; but Miss Vigors, after one horrified stare and gasp, was down amongst them all with the swoop of a falcon.

What she said in the fatal few minutes during which Olivia and Lord Dobbington slowly followed her, will never be known. They found Dora flushed, indignant, almost tearful; Mr. Vivian, stern, and deathly pale; Lord Sholto, looking hang-dog, his queer little boyish face the colour of Miss Chummy's hose; and that young lady herself looking as if a side-shot or two had hit her hard, somehow.

"My carriage, if you please—directly!" she demanded of Olivia. "We will wait for it in the Museum. Lord Dobbington, will you kindly take my niece there? At once—anywhere, away from here!"

So venomous was her emphasis, that the Bishop, sauntering up, opened his mild eyes, and Chummy observed, "Keep your hair on, old girl!" nudging Lord Sholto as she did so to follow and see the fun.

They retraced their steps to the house in funereal procession; Dora, trembling, and inattentive to Lord Dobbington's

pretty little speeches; Olivia making talk for the unconscious Bishop; Aunt Margery alone, stark and grim; and Chummy and Lord Sholto tittering in the rear.

The Museum was one of two long, low, dismal apartments—confessedly coal-sheds or potato-stores in their earliest intention. Ranges of shelves were scantily besprinkled with geological specimens—fragments of ore, potsherds (Roman or otherwise), a collection of fossils, another of birds' eggs, and a stone coffin. Lord Dobbington did the honours in a subdued tone, as if he were in church, reading every manuscript label attentively.

"Most interesting! There is another room beyond, I believe. This way," and he led poor little dazed Dora forward to a door in a dark corner, in and out of which Chummy and her swain had been skylarking.

"Yes. This way, Miss Montresor," and Chummy drew back with exaggerated politeness. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Lord Dobbington!" for, as he attempted to follow, she let the door swing from her hand, closing it sharply on Dora.

It clashed so smartly, and with a clang of iron, startling the whole party. Chummy seized the brass knob and tried to turn it but Olivia rushed up with a scream of dismay, and thrust her aside.

"Merciful Heaven! What have you done? That's the strong-room, and it's a spring lock!"

"No, no!" shrieked Chummy. "They are holding it inside. Open it, Sholto, you idiot. Open!" She tugged frantically, and beat the blank face of the door savagely. "Oh, I have killed her! I have murdered them both!" and with a burst of mad laughter she sank on the floor, gasping, tearing, choking in violent hysterics.

No one could heed her just then. Miss Vigors stood staring like one stricken to stone. Lord Dobbington put up his glass.

"Dear, dear!" he said, feebly poking at the keyhole with his cane; but the Bishop was off in three strides, no one knew where.

"We must get the key at once," cried Olivia. "The clerk of the works may have it."

"Oh, who will fetch him! Let me go!" cried poor shaking Aunt Margery.

"He lodges in the village—more than a mile the shortest way."

Chummy had been listening, her handkerchief crammed into her mouth. "I will do it!" she cried scrambling to her feet.

"I've run that before now in five minutes. Tell me again." And as the last words left Olivia's lips she was off.

As she flashed out the Bishop strode in armed with a heavy pickaxe. "I've sent for the nearest blacksmith," he cried. "Meanwhile the lock might be smashed," and he delivered three ringing blows.

The Bishop's arm was sturdy, and the Bishop's strokes were stout, but they left no more dint in the tempered steel than if they had been dealt by thistledown. He dropped the pick discouraged.

"Is this a regular strong-room, then?" he asked.

"I don't know." Olivia forced her stiff lips to reply. "Sir Piers intended to keep his valuable curios here some day. It's burglar and fire-proof."

The Bishop's face darkened under its crimson. "I never thought of that. In that short space—see how closely the door fits—every minute may be of importance. Will some one call to them? Can they hear us?"

"Dora! Dora darling! Answer. Knock! Let us here you move," screamed the poor aunt.

Silence. Utter silence. The silence of death.

"Olivia! Mamma wants you," said Lucy's flat little voice outside. "You shouldn't really stay away. People are going."

"Let them go!" cried Olivia savagely. "Keep away, Lucy. Tell the band to play a last dance, and don't come near us." The obedient Lucy stared, but departed unquestioning.

Aunt Margery knelt before the shut door, wailing piteous, inarticulate appeals. Lord Dobbington fired off, "Bless my soul!" at intervals, like minute guns.

Then into their midst dashed Chummy. "Gone! Gone for his holiday up to London! And I've killed them both! Oh! Oh!" and falling into Lord Dobbington's arms, she resumed her hysterics exactly where she had left them off.

On her steps followed a man who stood staring around with grey, ghastly face, and eyes full of horror. "She is there? There?" he cried hoarsely, "and you all stand idle!" and with wild impatience he dragged the coat from his shoulders and seized the pick.

"The blacksmith is sent for," spoke the Bishop; but his nephew only stamped his foot in impatience. "It may be hours before a man is found to-day."

"You cannot touch that iron."

"Then the brickwork shall come down!" and changing the direction of his blows, the bricks, in fact, were soon crumbling and splintering down in showers.

"Bless you! Bless you!" sobbed Aunt Margery.

"He will only come to the iron lining," murmured the Bishop discouragingly, but he, too, looked on in breathless expectancy as under the fierce onslaught of his nephew's stalwart young arms the mouldering old bricks gave way.

"Hullo! What's up?" enquired a voice that made them all start. Lord Sholto's. And there he was, striped flannels, Chinese hat and all, his little round eye cocked enquiringly through his little round eyeglass at the scene. "What do you want in there? Some work of darkness of Miss Chummy's, eh?" Someone enlightened him. "Oh, I say!" and his face drew down to a dismal length. "Miss Montresor. Poor little girl!"

"Why, you were there too!"

"Oh, was I though? Didn't you see me slip out? Bear to the right!" he shouted to the Curate who stopped for a minute, "you'll do nothing there. Three feet further, and high up. I'll come back and lend a hand directly," and he disappeared.

"This—ah—relieves the situation of its awkwardness," remarked Lord Dobbington; but nobody listened, for Mr. Vivian had seized the pick again and started with double energy. One blow more and a great crack split upwards, another, and the end of the pick crashed through.

"I'm all right. Don't be frightened," came Dora's sweet little voice from the other side, with just a faint tremble in it. It took some time gradually to enlarge the opening, but it was done; and then carefully lifted out by the Curate's strong arms, pretty Dora was amongst them again, pale, but smiling. Her hands were clasped round that lucky Curate's neck, and there she held them, while Aunt Margery flung her arms ecstatically round both and kissed and blessed impartially. All crowded round her eagerly, but she seemed only anxious to get away quietly.

"Don't ask me any questions," she implored, "and I will promise never to tell a word to Aunt Juliet!" And Aunt Margery, after a moment's reflection, jumped at the offer.

All were gone except Olivia and Lord

Sholto. She laid her hand gently on his arm and looked full in his face.

"That hole does not open into the strong-room," she said quietly, "only into a space under the stairs. How did Miss Montresor get there, and how did you both get out of the strong-room?"

"Through the top," he said with an innocent smile. "Didn't any of you see the place was all open above? Lucky for us, for you would never have broken in there. I helped her out; but we were no better off: got into a locked-up back-kitchen, or something. We had no idea what a taking you all were in. Then I dropped out of the window at last, and came round to see how you were all getting on, and—and—it seemed such a pity that Vivian should have his trouble for nothing. Why, I just coaxed her to get in there and be rescued, you see!"

HE WAS A BACHELOR.

By B. DEMPSTER.

Author of "No," "Mrs. Silas B. Bunthorp," etc. etc.

CHAPTER I.

He was a bachelor, and she lived at his gates. Circumstances—in the shape of a legacy—had placed her there. These circumstances, also, had presented her with that cottage after he had shut up the great house, and started off to make the voyage of the world. He had been fifteen years making it.

This accounted for the intense excitement which stirred the neighbourhood the week when he returned at last to his beautiful home. It also naturally accounted for the flutter in the breast of the gentle old maid who lived at his gates. This anxious nervousness had induced her to send for a niece to stay with her, till the trying ordeal of the first few weeks.

This niece, a very pretty girl of seventeen, was standing, this April evening, in the gateway of the cottage garden, looking down the lane. Her hands were full of the golden daffodils she had been gathering. Her face was flushed with the exercise; her hat, pushed a little back from her forehead, allowed the soft hair to escape in the daintiest disorder of fair, fluffy curls.

"Oh, aunt! here he comes," she exclaimed in a sweet, low voice, vibrating with excitement.

"Who, my dear?" her aunt, who was standing a little farther back in the garden,

behind a large American currant-bush, off which she was cutting neat little pieces, looked up with gentle interest, "the butcher? I want a beef——"

"Aunt! And he's stout! Oh, aunt! Fancy his being stout! How can I do it?" There was a note of such dismay and despair in the latter exclamation that her aunt came hastily out to look at her.

"Oh, yes; do wait there, aunt, and you will see him ride past. He is just near the elms. You can pretend you are talking to me about this tree."

"My dear!" in total bewilderment, "to look at the butcher——"

"Butcher! Why, it is Mr. Christopher!"

Miss Brown darted back behind the American currant-bush.

Mr. Christopher! And stout!

"Yes, aunt!" Janet Brown's sweet, steady voice rose clear on the evening air. "I quite think this tree ought to be cut down; it is old and ugly, and spoils all the lovely spring hedge."

The sound of horses' feet passing slowly told Miss Brown, behind her bush, that Mr. Christopher was passing her gate.

He was passing, and, for the life of him, and though he was past middle age, and stout, he could not help a lingering look at the lovely girl-figure standing there, in the radiance shining from the west, and then he rode on in it himself, and remembered that he was growing old; that he was following the setting sun, while she was still looking to the place of its rising. Perhaps one day a young and gallant lover would come riding towards her as he had done, and then—— He drew in a deeper breath which might almost have been a sigh.

He was not given to sentiment; but he had not yet grown used to the solitary grandeur of his great house. He had only been home three days.

The thought that, perhaps, he had made a mistake in remaining a bachelor haunted him. And, strive as he would, he could not banish from his thoughts the remembrance of the girl in the lane, a girl such as he once might have won.

In the meantime she too was thinking a great deal of him. She had been unusually silent and thoughtful, while putting her daffodils into their vases. The result of these meditations came out suddenly, as she and her aunt sat at the tea that women, when living alone, substitute for dinner. Home-made bread, dainty cakes, new-laid eggs, and pale amber honey, made a repast

that the town-bred girl thoroughly appreciated. She had arrived at the honey before her thoughts were ready for speech.

"Yes, aunt, I shall marry him."

"Marry whom, dear?"

"Why, Mr. Christopher, of course! There, aunt, you've broken that lovely cup! I always say you ought to hold the lid of the teapot on, when you pour out tea."

But Miss Brown did not hear her. She sat gazing at her niece in helpless dismay.

"Yes, aunt, I must," said Janet, with the same terribly frank and earnest eyes. "Though he is stout, and, I am sure, quite bald, and his face looks like a rosy-cheeked apple. You see, I must do something."

We are so poor at home—you don't know how poor! There is mother needs everything; it makes our hearts ache to see her look so white and thin. Papa is worried to death. And then there are all the girls growing up, too, like me; and the boys to be educated; and there must be someone to pay the bills."

"But, my dear child, you don't mean to say that you would marry Mr. Christopher only to pay bills with!"

She was unutterably shocked, and her eyes brightened almost as if she were angry.

"Why, aunt, what else should I marry him for? It is only a pity he is stout, and old——"

"Janet, you are a wicked girl, and I am ashamed of you!" Miss Brown rose, trembling with indignation. "Calling a gentleman you know nothing of, names like that!"

The girl gazed across the table, dumb-founded. Then she sprang up, and, running to her aunt, flung her arms round her neck.

"Don't be cross, aunt. I really couldn't bear you to be so cross with me—you, who are never cross with anybody. And I am sure I didn't mean to call——"

She stopped. Her father was old and stout; and yet if she had mentioned that fact to anyone, she would not have thought she was "calling him names." She would have been only stating the fact of his appearance, as she was now that of Mr. Christopher's. What could have made her aunt so angry? Of course, though it made no difference with a father, it was only natural for a girl to prefer her husband not to be "old and stout."

"I'm dreadfully sorry, aunt!" she said again, in sincere remorse. And her aunt's

indignation melted under that fresh, sweet kiss, and she sat down again to finish her tea. But she was very thoughtful for the rest of the evening.

This lovely niece of hers had suddenly appeared in a new light. Up till to-day, she had been to her aunt only a simple, natural school-girl: her conversation at tea had developed her, in her aunt's eyes, into a woman. It was the time of lovers! Miss Brown quite trembled as she thought of the Curate down the lane, and that soldier son of the Squire home on leave, who had taken to walking so slowly up the lane. They might already be on the point of proposing. The responsibility was dreadful. She was strongly tempted to send Janet straight back to her mother's care.

And then the girl's own calm determination to marry Mr. Christopher fell upon her again like a stunning blow, and paralysed every other thought.

CHAPTER II.

FATE seemed to favour the determination. An accident with a runaway horse, out of which catastrophe Mr. Christopher had, fortunately, safely extricated Janet, opened up an acquaintanceship between the Manor House and the pretty little cottage in the lane.

Mr. Christopher had called himself in the evening to see how Janet was, and in her excitement and gratitude, Miss Brown forgot all the nervousness that had troubled her previously, concerning the making of his acquaintance, and received him with the sweet unconsciousness of self, which made her so generally loved. The room was dusk, but he knew that she had tears in her eyes, by her voice; but she did not break down, and he was intensely grateful to her, for he had all a man's horror of a woman's tears, and his dislike to having any action of his own made a fuss over.

Janet herself was quite able to get about again in a day or two, and in the meantime; Mr. Christopher was a daily visitor at the door to enquire after her health. His time was fully taken up in receiving and returning the county's visits, and looking into the business matters of his estate; but he always found time to stop a moment at the little gate, near which he had first seen the girl standing in the western sun, and to enquire after her.

The second time, however, that he

entered the house was not till a week after the accident. Janet, who had been out driving with her aunt, and was still standing in the drawing-room, heard his voice at the hall door, and, before Miss Brown knew what she was doing, ran out into the hall to speak to him.

"Oh, you must come in, Mr. Christopher," she said, with flushing face and grateful eyes. "I have never had an opportunity of thanking you properly yet."

How could he resist? With a throbbing of all his pulses, at the touch of the slender girl-hand, he followed her submissively down the Indian-matted hall, with its quaint, old-fashioned jars, into the drawing-room, where Miss Brown stood bending over a table arranging some violets in a dish. She did not turn for a second, though Janet, in her glad, young voice, told her that she had persuaded Mr. Christopher to come in and have tea with them. Then she turned and greeted him with a prim slowness, which irritated the girl, falling as it did on her own impulsive eagerness and gratitude.

"That's just like an old maid! They are always afraid of doing anything out of the usual routine," she thought in warm disdain, as she rang for tea to be brought into the drawing-room. "I am sure I might ask him to come in, considering that he saved my life, and is as old as father."

The words suddenly brought back to her the recollection of the determination she had stated so calmly to her aunt. Oddly enough, she could not think calmly of it now. She blushed crimson and felt a stab of sharp shame as if she had wilfully done this man who had saved her life a great injury.

She came back to where the other two were sitting, talking together after the fashion of polite strangers. Mr. Christopher turned rather eagerly to her with some remark. It was easy to see that she had fascinated him with her beauty and fresh brightness.

After that Miss Brown did not say much, but sat quietly drinking her tea, listening to the girl's merry chatter, for Janet, still pained with that sense of having done Mr. Christopher an injury, was exerting herself to please him, as she would never have done to win him for a husband; and every now and then she looked at the girl's lovely face, with something in her eyes, which if either of those other two had noticed they would not have

understood. But neither of the other two noticed her silence. They were both absorbed in each other. Miss Brown saw this. 'A queer little smile, half bitter, half self-scornful, flickered across her lips, and she took out from the throat of her dress a knot of violets she had pinned there, just as Mr. Christopher entered the room.

They fell from her fingers, and Mr. Christopher, rising at that moment, planted a large, though well-shaped foot on them. The action, his utter unconsciousness of the havoc he had wrought, his prosaic age and appearance, all falling as they did on the mingled mood she was in, aroused in her such a keen sense of the ludicrous, that she laughed outright. The other two started and looked at her. Janet had never heard her aunt laugh like that before. It was not the gentle, well-bred, slightly prudish laugh of the old maid, who had lived out her life in a narrow circle of refined elderly lady society; but it was the pretty rippling laughter of intense amusement, which might have broken from any girl's lips. Mr. Christopher gazed at her for a second in intense amazement, bewilderment, even dismay; all of which ended in a steady, keen look. The magical effect she had produced, brought Miss Brown sharply back to the conventionalities of drawing-room life. Blushing hotly, she was about to begin some certainly untruthful explanation of her singular behaviour, when she was saved by Mr. Christopher immediately taking up his hat to depart. Any explanation after that would have seemed foolish. He went away saying that a widowed sister was coming to keep house for him in a day or two, and that he hoped Miss Brown would do him the pleasure of calling on her. There was a constraint in Janet's pretty eyes, when she and her aunt were left alone.

"Aunt!" she said abruptly, but rather shyly, "were you laughing at us and what I said that night at tea? You don't know how horrid I felt to-day when I thought of it. You see— Well, I was only thinking then how poor we were, and of those dreadful bills. But, to-day, I could not help thinking of him. If I marry—

"Marry?" as Janet stopped.

"Well, aunt, you see, he really does seem a little like—the Curate for instance—and of course I am dreadfully grateful—"

"So you would marry him now for gratitude. It is worse than the other!"

CHAPTER III.

BEFORE six weeks were ended, it was quite decided in the neighbourhood that Mr. Christopher was to marry Miss Janet Brown. Mr. Christopher's sister had arrived at the Manor House, and Miss Brown had called on her, with the result that a great intimacy had sprung up between the two families. It seemed as if Mr. Christopher and his sister could not make enough of the girl. Scarcely a day passed without their meeting, either in their respective houses, or at some of the many summer entertainments going on in the neighbourhood. To the gratification of the county, Mr. Christopher showed himself to be most sociable; and it must be confessed that the impression Janet had so evidently made on him caused a good deal of disappointment in minds of a matrimonial complexion. But so long as the engagement was not formally announced, he was still looked upon as a free man, and being a rich man, was made much of accordingly. Janet, whose beauty and sweetness had already made her a favourite, became still more popular now that such brilliant prospects shone on her. She received more invitations than ever, with the result that she and her aunt were living in a very whirl of gaiety. For Miss Brown went everywhere with her, never willingly relinquishing her task of chaperoning the girl, for whose welfare she considered herself responsible.

It was June now. The primroses and "pale daffodils" had faded away, leaving the warm flush of roses in the land; and it seemed as if in those six weeks a great change had come over Janet's life too. The careless, unthinking gladness of the school-girl had deepened and ripened into the fuller, richer life of the woman, though, as yet, she herself was quite unconscious of the change.

Miss Brown wondered if the tender devotion, the chivalrous homage, of Mr. Christopher had anything to do with it.

Perhaps it was because she had never had any daughters of her own to chaperon, that she was so terribly anxious over the responsibility of this pretty niece. The sight of the penniless Curate at the end of the lane caused trepidation; but it was nothing to what moved her when she saw Mr. Christopher walking up the garden pathway. She had written to Janet's mother, telling her of the matter, and hinting at her fear that the girl, in her

anxiety to help at home, might sacrifice herself. But her mother had only remarked in answer, that Janet was to be trusted.

But they did not take into consideration the great temptation such a man as John Christopher was. And then the old maid's thoughts came to a stand, and she laughed with a little choke in her throat. He was "old and stout," she kept forgetting that. She only remembered what he had been, when she knew him in her girlhood, years and years before, when he had been tall and broad-shouldered.

Perhaps she herself would have failed to recognise in this portly, courteous, grey-haired man, the handsome, dashing John Christopher she had last seen, unless she had known who he was. He had not recognised her. But then he had never taken much notice of her, even in those days of her girlhood. She had been only one of a dozen girls; not very pretty either, and always rather shy, particularly when in his presence.

He had been one of the few young men in the neighbourhood—a stranger, too—only there on a visit from that great far-off, mysterious world of London. A three months' visit, and then he left rather suddenly, for he said good-bye to scarcely any one. Everybody said that Molly Dale, the beauty of the neighbourhood, had behaved badly to him, and that was the reason he left so abruptly. She was a desperate flirt, and she had certainly encouraged him. Then he had proposed and she had rejected him. So it came out afterwards. After some years, a relation died, and left Miss Brown this cottage, and she had come to live in it.

Then she had discovered that John Christopher and the wealthy owner of Langlands were the same. Her first impulse was to go away again; and then she remembered that she was not rich enough not to make use of her legacy, and he was away, and even if he should return, he would not recognise in a faded old maid of forty-eight, a girl whom he had scarcely noticed years before. So she stayed on, and he had come back and had not recognised her. She told herself that it was a very good thing, for if he had, perhaps she might have evoked unpleasant memories of what he had suffered at Molly Dale's hands. Somehow this contentment did not explain a curious twinging at her heart-strings, when, on the evening he had made her acquaintance over Janet's accident, he

looked at her with grave, unrecognising eyes.

She sat thinking over these past things late one afternoon as she sat alone in the drawing-room. Janet had gone to a garden-party with Mrs. Foster, the Curate's mother, her aunt having a bad headache. John Christopher and his sister would, of course, be at the garden-party, and it was almost as certain that Janet would be as much with them as with Mrs. Foster. She knew the girl would be safe and happy with them, and but for the intense sensitiveness that she had for the girl's delicacy in the condition of affairs between herself and John Christopher, would have been quite glad that she was with them.

But she could not bear Janet to be placed in any position which might make her choice difficult when the time came. She was torn between anxiety for her niece's happiness and John Christopher's. For she knew that these two interests were opposed to each other. Janet would not be a satisfied, happy wife if she married John Christopher; he would be unhappy if she refused to marry him, or did him the still greater wrong of marrying him.

Perhaps all these anxious thoughts had made her head worse, for she shrank a little as the sound of voices and laughter broke the sunny stillness of her garden outside. Janet had come back from her garden-party, and Mr. Christopher had come with her, not Mrs. Foster. A sudden feeling of indignation that the latter should leave her to be escorted home by him, died away as swiftly, in the thought that perhaps it was all settled. He had probably a right to bring her home. She stood for a second as she had risen from her chair, her face turned towards the hall which they had just entered. Then she roused herself, as with a slight effort, and went to meet them, as Janet, and John Christopher, and a young man, entered the drawing-room.

"Did not Miss Foster come back with you?" she asked, after having greeted Mr. Christopher and the young man who was introduced to her by Mr. Christopher, as his nephew, Captain Hope; "I thought she was coming to spend the evening with us."

"She was quite done up with the heat, and so I left her at her house and came on alone."

"She should have sent her maid with you. She knows that I don't like you walking alone," said Miss Brown with the prim coldness which was the only thing that ever irritated Janet against her.

"But I wasn't alone!" exclaimed Janet. "At least not for long. Mr. Christopher caught me up at the big elm," flashing one of her lovely smiles up at him. No man or woman could resist those smiles; neither could John Christopher.

"We overtook Miss Janet," he said, with the kindly smile that made man, woman, and child respect and like him instinctively. "My sister did not go," he continued, turning to Miss Brown again. "She was afraid of the heat too. Jack and I had to get out of the dog-cart and leave it at the beginning of the lane, where, I conclude, James is still trying to persuade Firefly to pass that white post. We overtook Miss Janet."

There was something a little anxious in his face, as if he were afraid Miss Brown would be vexed with the girl for what was really his fault.

"I am very much obliged to you for your care of her," she said stiffly.

He turned away from her with a slight shade of disappointment in his face, to Janet, who was talking with his nephew.

Miss Brown—accustomed during the last six weeks to notice every sign in Janet and John Christopher—read on Captain Hope's face, intense admiration of the pretty girl before him. But Janet's brilliance seemed suddenly to have faded, and she looked so tired that Mr. Christopher said "good-bye," giving a message from his sister that they would take luncheon with them next day.

"Do you think Captain Hope is handsome?" asked Janet carelessly, as she sat at the piano the same evening playing little snatches of dreamy music.

"I don't think I noticed him much," said her aunt.

"Everybody was asking who he was this afternoon," said Janet, not quite so carelessly, and with even a note of irritation in her voice. "He is a V.C. too. I have never met a V.C. before, and I was so glad that I played in the same set with him. He plays tennis beautifully; and he is so nice about it, and he doesn't mind whom he plays with. He was so good to me. I played dreadfully this afternoon; but we won everything. There was no beating him."

"Did you play tennis all the afternoon?" asked her aunt.

"Nearly, though it was so hot. Then Captain Hope rowed me on the lake to get cool. Fanny Pollock went with us," hastily foreseeing her aunt's possible objec-

tion. But her aunt was absorbed in another thought, awakened by that tennis. John Christopher did not play tennis, nor did he usually go out in Lady Pollock's little cockle-shell of a pleasure boat.

"What a pity Mrs. Carew could not go this afternoon!" she said tentatively. "Mr. Christopher always misses her. What did he do with himself?"

"Oh, he looked after all the elderly people," and Janet began playing again.

"Would you mind stopping a moment, dear?" said her aunt after a pause. "I want to speak to you."

The girl's hands fell from the piano, and she wheeled slowly round on the music-stool to look at her aunt. Miss Brown was sitting at her work-table, the shaded lamp on it throwing a softened light on her. She was dressed in some becoming neutral tint suitable to her age. Her hands, slender and beautiful, were resting on the work which had fallen from them. Her face was faintly flushed, and her eyes were shining and earnest. An exclamation of wonder and affection broke from Janet; her aunt's appearance striking her, even at this moment, when her own heart was full of rebellious, angry, ashamed, self-remorseful feelings. For she knew what her aunt was going to say.

"I want to say something to you, dear. You need not ask me how I know it; you will understand, too, why I say it. But, once, long ago, when he was young, Mr. Christopher loved a girl as beautiful as yourself. She behaved very badly to him. To-day I see, and I think you see yourself, that he loves you. Don't let him have to suffer again."

Janet did not answer. She sat gazing at her aunt for a second, the breath coming quick and fast through her parted lips; then she wheeled suddenly round to the piano again, and dashed into a merry polka.

Her aunt, startled, angered, almost disgusted at her heartlessness, rose and left the room.

The girl played on, wildly, recklessly, brilliantly, unconscious that her aunt had gone, till her hands fell exhausted from the keys. Then she turned round to speak; and if only Miss Brown had been there to see, she would have seen that the look that had come into Janet's eyes as she spoke to her, was still there. Terror, horror, repugnance, and a desperate, pitiful appealing.

"Does she mean it?" she asked herself, finding herself alone. "Does she mean

that I have gone so far that I must marry him now? He is so good and so kind, and I—— Oh, yes, it is true! I must marry him now!"

CHAPTER IV.

JULY had come, and was half over. Captain Hope was still at his uncle's, and the intimacy between the inhabitants of the Manor House and Briar Cottage included him now in its pleasant comings and goings.

At first he was almost as constant a visitor at the cottage as his uncle, who was very much attached to him, and always liked to have him with him. He was very popular, too, in the county, and invitations poured in on him as they did on his uncle.

The two men were always about together, and, as Janet met Mr. Christopher everywhere, she naturally met Captain Hope too. Mr. Christopher was so proud of his nephew, so perfectly confident in his honour, that he seemed almost to take pains to throw the two together.

Miss Brown could not account for his blind generosity, for even she was beginning to see that this handsome soldier might prove a dangerous rival. After all, Janet could not see John Christopher as he had been, only as he was; and his nephew was slight and young, and John Christopher was old and stout. Not that Captain Hope's general conduct encouraged her anxiety. After that first week of evident devoted admiration, the gallant officer relapsed into cool indifference.

But there were moments when Miss Brown surprised a curious expression in his eyes as he looked at his uncle, and he would turn strangely pale if Janet appeared suddenly amongst them, or if she brushed accidentally against him. As for Janet herself, she seemed to have taken quite a dislike to him. She contradicted him; treated him with coldness—almost to discourtesy. But there had come into her eyes a haunted, harassed look, which was all the more perceptible when in the presence of Mr. Christopher. And one day, after her aunt had been praising some fresh act of kindly thoughtfulness on his part, she broke into a storm of tears, and ran out of the room. Miss Brown saw that there was something wrong, and with her heart full of the remembrance of what John Christopher had suffered once before, she feared terribly for him now.

And he was so blindly confident in this nephew! He, the chief concerned, seemed the only one unconscious of the intense excitement burning beneath the calm surface of their daily social intercourse. Miss Brown felt as if they were all walking over a mine, which might be sprung at any moment, by a chance word or look, dealing disaster and misery to all.

Her fears were only too well founded. One July evening, as she walked between her carnations in the starlight, a slender girl-figure came swiftly through the little wicket gate at the end of the path. It was Janet, and she caught her aunt by the arm.

"Oh, aunt! aunt!" she cried, in a broken, breathless voice, which choked now and then into a sob. "Let me go away to-morrow! Oh! how shall I tell you? Captain Hope—we did not know—we have tried so hard, too, not to care for—— Oh! don't blame him. I goaded him into it. I was so cruel and bitter to-night as he brought me home—and before we knew what had happened, it all came out. Oh, don't look at me with such angry eyes! I feel so miserable, so wicked! And Jack, too. But I have sent him away for ever. I will not marry him. But I will not marry anyone else—I could not. And I have been so wicked to Mr. Christopher! You must see him, aunt, and tell him; he is coming to-morrow. For Jack said that this morning, as they walked together, Mr. Christopher said suddenly, 'I will ask her to-morrow.' And when Jack asked him, 'Whom?' he looked astonished, as if he did not know he had spoken aloud, and then said, with a smile—that Jack said made him feel as if he would rather have been knocked down—'Why, Miss Brown, of course.'"

"And after this, Captain Hope persisted——"

"Oh, indeed, aunt, he could not help it. But he sees as I do. Mr. Christopher has been so good to him. Only he thinks that by-and-by—but I tell him, never! never! But when Mr. Christopher comes to-morrow, will you tell him, from me, that I am the wickedest, most ungrateful, most miserable girl in existence; but that I am going away. For I did try to make him like me. And now I would rather die than marry him!"

Janet left the cottage early next day, and all that morning, and till late in the afternoon, Miss Brown waited for Mr. Christopher, her heart shrinking within

her, before the ordeal she was to go through. She had cried till she could cry no more—for Janet, for John Christopher, for her own past girlhood. And now she sat very white and heavy-eyed waiting for the man, who, all unknown to himself, had been the love of her girlhood and womanhood. Ah! here he was at last. He was here in the room, and she had to tell him. His manner showed that he had come on an important mission. He did not greet her with his usual cheery kindness. His face was grave, almost stern, and there was a touch of nervous constraint in his manner. And then he seemed to see something different in her too, for he exclaimed as he held her hand, "Is anything the matter?"

"I am quite well," she said faintly.

He took the chair she indicated, and began talking of the flowers in a vase near; but he did not seem quite satisfied with her answer, for, as he talked, he kept looking at her in a quiet, searching manner.

"I wish Jack could have seen these carnations. He is devoted to gardening, and grows roses between the intervals of killing his enemies and carrying his friends from under a deadly fire. But he started off like a rocket by last night's mail, nearly wrung my hand off, and talked some bosh at having suddenly to rejoin his regiment. Some spiritual communication between himself and his commanding officer, I suppose, for there was no talk of it before dinner, and no post after."

Miss Brown gazed at him frightened. His perfect unconsciousness of his fate appalled her. She could bear it no longer, and plunged into the breach.

"Janet has gone, too, this morning."

John Christopher stared at her in bewildered amazement and dismay; then he began to understand.

"Good Heavens!" he ejaculated at last, "do you mean to say that they have quarrelled?"

"Quarrelled!" She thought his brain was turned.

"Yes, I was an old fool, I dare say; but you know Jack has been like a son to me and—and—well, there's no fool like an old fool. I fell quite in love with Miss Janet, and thought of Jack and had him down. I sent him to take her home last night after dinner, thinking it was quite time they came to an understanding, and I thought you would forgive it for once, and then—" He stopped. She was trembling from head to foot. Her lips

were white. The astonishment had nearly stunned her.

John Christopher forgot all about his match-making for others.

"Miss Brown! Lettice! You will let me call you that for the sake of old times," as the colour rushed back over her face and she sat up, all faintness gone, staring at him as if he had been a ghost.

"You recognised me!"

He laughed a strange laugh—pathetic, amused, sad.

"Yes; not the first day. You see I was not prepared by the name—it is not an uncommon surname, and I had not heard your Christian one. Janet only called you aunt. And then I always expected that if ever I did meet you again it would be as—. But the next afternoon I came, when you laughed, I remembered then the Lettice I used to know long ago, shy, flushing, grave, but breaking now and again into that joyous little laugh, like the notes of a bird. And then I discovered that you were Lettice Brown still. Why did not you marry Tom Hargreaves?"

"Tom Hargreaves!" vainly endeavouring for a moment to remember who Tom Hargreaves was.

Her eyes showed how true her bewilderment was. He suddenly read a whole history in them.

"And so Molly Dale told me a lie," he said quietly, but his eyes glowing. "She said you were engaged to that red-haired curate. I was going to ask you that night; but I went away then, and this is the end!" with a sudden stirring of bitter pathos at the thought of all the years wasted for a lie.

"But Molly Dale?"

"Molly!" with angry impatience. "I loved you, and my love, disappointed though it was, has never let me care enough for any other woman to make her my wife. I will not say that I have 'gone softly all the days of my life.' My life has been a happy one—since time softened the pain. But when I met you again, I knew it had missed something. Now I ask you to make it up to me. Be my wife."

"John! Oh, John!"

But he caught her hands, if not with the old impetuous passion of youth, still with a touch strong and steady.

"I cannot ask you to fall in love with me to-day. I am over sixty"—with a laugh.

"But I am forty-eight—"

"Lettice still, only with thirty years of

waiting love to make you dearer. Remember—I am growing old, and have never married for the remembrance of you. Am I selfish to plead my need?"

"No! Oh, no! It is I who dare not take advantage"—and then, somehow, it happened that he kissed her, and then he found out that she had loved him from the beginning.

The county was extremely disappointed, not to say displeased. But it succumbed very soon to Mrs. John Christopher's sweetness and hospitality; and when it found out that it was an old romance, begun long ago when she was a girl of seventeen, and that this was only its ending, it grew quite ecstatic.

Besides, it had soon another marriage to rejoice over, and there was no flaw of age or fitness here, for it was unanimously agreed that Janet and Captain Hope were a perfect bride and bridegroom.

LETITIA'S LOVER.

By ELLEN MULLEY.

CHAPTER I.

FRANCIS STRANGE was one of those unfortunate individuals, of whom relations and friends, who should know a man best, persist in forming expectations. I do not know what they had to go upon, but at school, college, when launched into the world, it was still the same. Francis never realised any one of them; but his friends never gave up the habit, until, rather early in life, he died, and then they left off expecting things any more. And then Francis Strange did what he certainly had "not" been expected to do; he left a little daughter behind him. It was the only thing, it turned out, that he had to leave; and he left her in the handsomest manner to his aunt, Miss Honoria Strange. No one had ever heard of his marriage, and his wife, it appeared, was dead. Miss Strange—who lived in other days, was something more than middle-aged at forty, and knew nothing of the world outside the small market-town in which she had been born—did not hesitate a moment. While her friends were wondering what the reserved, stern-faced woman would do, thus suddenly called upon, Miss Honoria had packed up her best black gown, and, before they had done wondering, had put herself into the coach for London. In a couple of days Miss Strange was back

again in Blickston, bringing little Letitia with her. Then the wondering began again. How would the blue-eyed mite of four they now saw daily trotting by the spare, straight-backed figure Blickston was so familiar with, find life in the formal household of Silent Street?—that street of awful respectability, where the echoes for ever slumbered, and where the blind-shadowed house stood, with an air of even more awful respectability than its neighbours, its echoes certainly never yet awakened by voice, or footfall lighter, or more youthful than Miss Honoria's own. Those who visited with Miss Strange wondered still more. The child laughed and danced about the gloomy house, climbed unrebuked the prim, unaccustomed knees, and laid her soft cheek upon the bombazine-clad bosom, beneath which there must have beaten a heart very much like other hearts, in spite of the starched and formal ways of its owner.

But Miss Honoria ruled Letitia, nevertheless, as she ruled her house, soberly, and, as she believed, justly. The church-goings three times on Sunday, and on two week-day evenings, with occasional missionary meetings thrown in, were, I fear, privileges which Letitia, as time went on, did not appreciate as she ought.

The Rector of the parish, who was a pretty constant visitor to the house in Silent Street, I am sorry to say she could not bear. She objected to his being short, and stout, and bald, and to his head shining so much. I cannot defend Letitia. It brought upon her the severest reprimand she had ever known; after which she wisely kept her feelings with regard to the Rector of Saint Timothy to herself. But she loved him none the more, and was, indeed, destined to love him something less.

But Letitia's life was not all church-going and missionary meeting. During the winter there would sometimes be as many as six or seven tea-parties in the place which Miss Honoria—though more than a little doubtfully—permitted Letitia to attend, and at which the girl met (and here it was Miss Honoria's doubts came in) the select youth of Blickston, bashfully admiring in very high-shouldered blue coats and dreadfully tight pantaloons, as was the fashion of the day. But Letitia only laughed at her admirers, and we all know what that means; and it is quite possible that, but for Aunt Honoria spraining her ankle on the steps of the Town

Hall, where she had been attending the last meeting of the season, Letitia, pretty and charming as she was, might never have had a lover of her own at all.

CHAPTER II.

ONE would not say, from an artistic point of view, that there was any particular picturesqueness in a flat stretch of apparently interminable shingle, fringed by a low ridge of coarse grass grown sand, with a background of country so flat as not to be even visible. True, there was a foreground of blue, sparkling sea, that whitened and broke with a never-ceasing swish and murmur along the miles of shore. There was also, about midway between point and point, a group of whitewashed fishermen's cottages, small and tumble-down, but flashing back the morning sun. A little lower down, the grey walls of a Martello tower, and farther still, away upon the eastern cliff, where the land begins to rise at last, a sturdy lighthouse. More claims than this to the picturesque the place had none; and yet it chanced that, on a fair May morning—nowhow many years ago!—when inland newly-opened leaves were waving, and hedge and orchard, blossom-starred, flung their odours over meadow and roadside, two figures were seated on the slightly shelving shingle, industriously at work with sketching-board and colours.

Between the two—a young man and a girl—there was a discreet distance, which, as the minutes stole on, neither attempted to lessen. The girl had her back turned on her unknown companion of the brush; too hard at work even to remember his near neighbourhood. It was very hard work, indeed, to all appearance. The pretty, pouting lips were tightly closed, the smooth white forehead puckered into a severely-critical frown; but at last the drawing was put aside, the white forehead smoothed itself, the pretty mouth lost its severely virtuous expression, the blue eyes smiled and sparkled like the sea. The toiling artist was lost, fled, and here was only youth and idleness—youth, golden-haired, blue-eyed, watching the breaking waves, and lazily content. The unfinished sketch—the lighthouse patiently waiting in the distance—was quite forgotten. The girl had laid aside her bonnet too. It was a dreadfully big one, and had quite hidden the wearer from her fellow artist working away in the rear.

He had suddenly become lazy, too. His hand unconsciously stopped; his eyes fixed themselves upon the girlish figure in the foreground, with which he had nothing to do. Presently a little fitful sea-breeze came and lifted the softly-curling hair, and began fluttering the scanty folds of the girl's cotton frock, which was pale yellow, and had pink rosebuds all over it; then passed to the bonnet-strings, which were also pink; and at last to the big bonnet itself, which it handled in a very unceremonious manner, and, before its owner was aware of what was going on, was boldly trundling, hoop-fashion towards the watching idler in the background.

In another moment both were on their feet, the vagrant bonnet hopping, skipping, with tantalising seconds of rest, between them. The two young people came laughing towards one another—hopping, skipping, resting, like the bonnet. It was almost at the young man's feet. A quick dart of the mahl-stick, and the runaway was secured, transfixed!

"What have I done?" he cried ruefully, as he lifted it, the pink strings fluttering reproachfully in the breeze. The girl could not answer him for laughing.

"Doesn't it really signify?" said the owner of the mahl-stick, considerably relieved.

"No, no, not a bit; I can make it all right in three minutes."

And the bonnet was lifted from the stick, its wound deftly closed, and, in another moment, the pink strings were being tied determinedly under the rounded chin. The young artist stood admiringly by, wondering more and more who this bit of innocent girlhood might be, appearing so suddenly and goddess-like upon this little-frequented shore.

"May I see your work?" he asked hesitatingly, as they turned their steps towards the spot where Letitia's hastily-abandoned block and colour-box lay in some disorder.

"Oh, please don't call it that!" the girl cried. "You don't know what it is like."

But her companion had already possessed himself of the sketch. He stood looking at it quite seriously for a moment, and then—he could not help himself—he burst into quite a peal of laughter.

"Is it really quite as bad as that?" cried our poor Letitia—for, of course, it was Letitia.

"It is not bad at all," cried the young man, red, remorseful. "I have done quite as bad myself, and worse—a great deal

worse. How you must hate me ! First your bonnet, and now——"

"Oh, don't !" cried Letitia, "it is I who was stupid, foolish. But I do not really mind. If only you will tell me what is really wrong !"

The young fellow's eyes were twinkling again.

"Well, you see," he said gravely, "it's the colouring which is a little—well, alarming. It generally is the colouring. A few good spongings, now, would soon make a wonderful difference. May I show you what to do with it ?"

And Letitia's newly-made friend dropped on to the shingle, and calmly set himself to efface the morning's work. Poor Letitia placed herself behind him. The young fellow could not see the wistful eye, nor did he guess at the innocent pain in her heart, with which the young girl watched his ruthless hand.

He chattered cheerfully over his work, and Letitia found herself chattering back, caring, too, a little less. I think I know a little of what poor Letitia's work was like. Most of us, I suppose, have somewhere or other come across those artless efforts of how long ago ? They hang here and there in their little black frames still, the weakly outlines faded, the colours kindly softened by Time's tender hand, and most of us, I think, can guess at the little thrill of pride with which the artists, whose fingers work no longer, looked upon their efforts.

There was not much for Letitia to look at when her companion rose at last.

"There," he said gaily, "we will make a fresh start to-morrow. You are going to let me give you lessons, you know. I shall be here another month, at least. It is not the most picturesque spot in the world, but I get plenty of sea and cloud effects, and that is what I want. You will come !"

The young fellow spoke eagerly enough, but Letitia made no answer. She was not looking at him, for the moment not even thinking of him.

"To-morrow," he had said, and suddenly it was Aunt Honoria whom she saw, of whom she was thinking—Aunt Honoria, who wanted to be kind and just, but who thought so many pleasant things were wrong. Why, if only this chance meeting of to-day were known, the very shore itself would be forbidden.

Letitia's new-found friend—who in the half-hour's innocent chatter over the de-

molished drawing, had learnt something of the girl's surroundings, of Miss Honoria, and the staid, starched household in Silent Street ; of the sprained ankle that had brought aunt and niece to the farm close by—knew pretty well what the clouded face meant. But he, at least, was not going to give way to Aunt Honoria.

"What is it ?" he said, smiling, though a little anxious. "Surely you are not afraid to promise ? You do not think I would ask you if it were really wrong ?"

Letitia looked up now. A young honest face was bent on hers, a pair of blue eyes, clear and candid as her own, smiled down on her. A strong, warm young hand clasped hers. Afraid ! How could she be afraid ?

"You are going to promise me ?" the young man cried brightly.

Letitia hesitated no longer. "Yes," she answered softly, smiling back at him, "I promise."

CHAPTER III.

DID our great-grandfathers and grandmothers, I wonder, find life such a very dull affair ? Our Letitia, who knew nothing beyond Blickston and its tea-parties, contrived, I think, to be tolerably happy. She was naturally light-hearted ; her face generally wore a dimpling smile ; her fresh young voice and girlish laughter echoed through the sombre house in Silent Street. Miss Honoria, as we know, took life more seriously ; but though she might now and then look reprovingly, she would not, in her heart, for worlds have silenced voice or laughter.

The girl was smiling on her way now across the fields. She had had the first adventure of her life. It was a very innocent little adventure, but it was none the less wonderful. But then everything was wonderful this glorious May morning. To Letitia's young limbs it seemed it was air, not solid and slightly uneven earth, she walked upon. And then how sweet the air was ! Mingling with the smell of the sea came the scent of thorn and apple blossom, and all the wondrous odours of the land. The farm with its out-buildings and orchards was in full sight now.

Letitia stood a moment gazing at the old grey-stone house. The sunshine seemed dimmed a little as she looked. For the first time in her young life, she was going to meet Aunt Honoria with an unknown something between them, or at least there

was a something to be held back. Poor Letitia, who would have gladly opened out her heart over the morning's innocent little adventure, was neither wise enough nor worldly enough to console herself, as she might otherwise have done.

It was Aunt Honoria—whose life had been so narrow, whose views were narrower still, whose notions of propriety were so severe, so rigid—who was, as I think, answerable for all the want of openness now, and in the days that followed. But Letitia could not stand gazing at the old farmhouse for the rest of the day. She went boldly in, striving, a little unsuccessfully, to feel and look as usual.

Miss Honoria, who was waiting dinner, welcomed her a little reprovingly. Letitia made no excuses. Her conscience was troubling her. She could not eat her dinner. She saw her aunt watching her, silent but anxious. The girl's cheeks flushed, her heart gave a little reproachful throb.

"It is only that I am not hungry, Aunt Honoria," she said, a little stammeringly. "I think, perhaps, it was the sun."

"If the sun is going to prevent you eating your dinner, Letitia, I must forbid your going down to the beach," Miss Honoria said severely. "There is plenty of shade in the orchard."

"In the orchard! Oh! Aunt Honoria," cried Letitia in dismay. "And I have done—that is, I have begun—a sketch. I am going to make a picture of the light-house."

"Well, you must be more careful, then. I am glad you have found an occupation. You know about idle hands, Letitia?"

Guilty Letitia made no answer, and Miss Honoria went on.

"I dare say it is very pleasant on the beach such a day as this; pleasanter than up here, no doubt. I hope before very long I may be able to get so far and see you at your work."

Letitia tried to say she hoped so too. She wanted to say it, to mean it. Why did she feel as if she could do neither? How horrible it was! If the events of this morning were going to make her deceitful and wicked like this, she should wish she had never seen the beach, had never met the new-found friend who would be daily looking for her there. Miss Honoria—who had never condescended to anything more luxurious than her own stiff and straight-backed chair—had made her way painfully to the sofa; Letitia helping her.

"Let me read to you, aunt," the girl cried. She could not be remorseful, repentant enough.

"Thank you, Letitia," said Miss Honoria from the sofa. "'The Memoirs, chapter v., if you will be so kind.'" It was a dreadful little book, but our Letitia read bravely on.

From the open window, by which she sat, she could hear the bees busy among the apple blossoms in the orchard close by; further away the murmur of the sea. The elder woman on the sofa heard them too. Then they faded, and Miss Honoria was in the land of dreams. Then the young voice stopped; the book slipped unnoticed to the floor. Letitia, too, was dreaming—dreaming the sweet vague, waking dreams that only youth can know.

CHAPTER IV.

THE days of sweet May sunshine and spring airs stole softly on. To Letitia it seemed that no sunshine had ever been so bright, no days had ever sped so swiftly by. Miss Strange was still a prisoner at the farm—that is, she got no further than her seat in garden or orchard. Each afternoon Letitia plodded dutifully through "The Memoirs" to the drowsy hum of bees; but each morning found her by the shore. Claude Ainslie (have I told you that was the young painter's name, and that Letitia thought no one had ever had so beautiful a one?) was of course there too—but then he was responsible to no one. Master and pupil set themselves steadily to work; at first, no doubt, with the very best intentions. Perhaps Letitia was not a very promising pupil: I cannot say. I only know that little by little the energy relaxed; the hands grew idle; the wet stretch of glistening shingle, the stiff light-house beyond, less and less interesting; until at last, and alas! there was nothing but the very best intentions left. Yes, there was something else—something that had crept with soft, lulling footsteps in and had drawn the two happy, foolish young people together, with a band stronger, sweeter, than all the art of the ages ever could have done.

But the sweetest moments are ever the most fleeting, and Nemesis, flat-footed and a little out of breath, was already stepping down upon the two in the shape of the Rev. Josiah Barker, Letitia's old enemy and the Rector of Saint Timothy.

Claude had already laughed over his stout figure and bald, shining head. He had, of course, heard all about Blickston, its tea-parties, and the young gentlemen who attended them. He had pretended even to be jealous of young Mr. Bacon at the bank, and young Mr. Rust, Dr. Kersey's assistant, who had nearly quarrelled about Letitia, but whose feet he knew very well had never been permitted to cross the sacred threshold in Silent Street. But Letitia's lover also knew full well that that same threshold would be as certainly forbidden to his own. That it was as Letitia's lover he claimed entrance there would only close the dragon-guarded doors the more determinedly against him.

So the two innocent young sinners, sometimes wildly happy, laughing, reckless of anything beyond to-day; at others, plunged into hopeless depths and despair, decided to face the future with their secret still between them. Separation, banishment, could be better faced than Miss Honoria. At the bare suggestion, poor Letitia's pink shell-tinted cheek went ghostly white. The child—she was but seventeen as yet—loved her aunt well and loyally; but she knew the severely rigid stern-willed woman too well, and how worse than useless any feeble word of hers would be in a matter such as this.

The young man would have been braver but for Letitia's sake, who would have to stay and bear. Well, they were both young, and could wait.

"It need not be for so very long," Claude consoled himself by saying. "When I get back to London I shall set to work in earnest. I shall not wait to be rich or to make a name, Letitia," he went on seriously. "And you will not mind being a poor artist's wife!"

"I shall not mind anything—anything—if only you go on caring for me," poor Letitia cried.

"As if I could ever do anything else! You must believe in me and trust me still, dear; even if the waiting should be longer than we think."

The two were standing by the water's edge; the waves were rippling with a little tired murmur at their feet. Claude had one of Letitia's soft pink hands in his, his left arm was about the pretty rounded waist. No one was there to see, unless it were a sea-gull or two or a fisherman's sturdy youngster. Claude drew the girl nearer to him still. Steps were coming surely towards them, slow and somewhat

heavy footsteps, crushing the loose shingle as they came. The young man's face was bent so dreadfully close to the big bonnet. If only it had been not quite so big! If only the waves had stayed their restless voice for one moment! But they did nothing of the kind.

When the heavy steps were quite upon them the two turned, and there, fronting them, red-faced, breathless, his pale eyes starting from his head with surprise and horror, stood the Rector of Saint Timothy.

I can scarcely say on which side was the most dismay. Poor Letitia stood staring dumbly with frightened, wide blue eyes. Claude boldly kept his arm about the trembling little figure; it would have seemed to him like the basest desertion to have withdrawn it at such a moment. He stood waiting for the new comer to speak. The stout, red-faced Rector found his voice at last.

"Letitia, my child," he gasped, "come with me, come to Miss Honoria. She sent me to you. She must know. She must be told. There's no need to be afraid. You know how she loves you, and I will do my best."

Yes, Miss Honoria must be told. There was no choice in the matter now. But Letitia was only thinking of her lover. She could not go from him like this. They had looked for days together yet, and now, in a moment, the parting had come. And suddenly there flashed upon her all that parting meant. The old, dull round of life—she had never realised how dull, how dreary before—with its church-goings, missionary meetings, and tea-parties; the life into which Claude could never come, confronted her in all its pitiless bareness. She had tasted of the tree of knowledge—it was forbidden fruit, but she had eaten of it, and the days of happy ignorance could be hers no more. The picture was more than she could bear, and poor Letitia broke into a storm of passionate weeping. Claude drew her closer to him. The Rector—who was a good little man, though Letitia did not approve of him, and who only wanted to do his duty—dragged forth a red-and-yellow bandana handkerchief, and blew his nose very hard indeed. He had not yet quite recovered his breath, and his big white tie was limp and twisted. He was not beautiful to look at, but he was kindly-natured, and sorry for these misguided young people.

Claude found himself addressing the enemy in quite a friendly manner.

"If you will kindly go on," he said, "I will bring Miss Letitia a little later. As we are to part, you may suppose that we have a little to say to one another."

The Rector looked at the two, doubtful, uncertain. He was not sure that Miss Honoria would approve, or rather he was quite sure she would not.

"Oh, you need not be afraid," said the young man with a little laugh. "There is not a postchaise anywhere nearer than Blickston."

Then Mr. Barker went plodding heavily over the shingle once more, and the young culprits were again alone.

After Letitia had had her cry out on Claude's shoulder, and Claude had wiped the last hot tear away with his own handkerchief—not without a malicious thought of Miss Honoria, up at the farm, as he did so—the two felt a little comforted. That there was nothing to be done, that it would be worse than useless Claude's ever attempting to see or speak with Miss Honoria, they were both quite agreed. There was nothing left them but to make their poor little plans for the future. I say poor little plans, because they all and only resolved themselves into this: they must wait.

"If we only trust one another, Letitia," Claude said.

And Letitia said: "I shall always trust you, Claude, if we have to wait until I am as old as Aunt Honoria."

At which awful vision of the future little Letitia's blue eyes filled again.

But the two young people turned their backs upon the blue shimmering sea at last—it seemed to both like turning them upon all the happy past—and took their way—need I say with what lingering, reluctant feet—towards the farm and Miss Honoria.

Claude accompanied Letitia straight up to the open farm-house door, about which some careless and unsympathetic fowls were pecking, and upon the steps of which a dog was stretched lazily blinking in the sunshine. Claude stooped down and boldly gave his Letitia a farewell kiss, in face of the indifferent fowls and the lazily blinking dog.

"Remember, dear," he said, "I shall stay on here for some time longer now. Your aunt will take you back, no doubt, at once to Blickston; but she cannot prevent my coming there. A line, a word, from you, will bring me."

There was another dreadful moment of farewell, and then Letitia was standing

alone with only an open door and a few feet of cool, dusky stone passage between her and Aunt Honoria.

CHAPTER V.

LETITIA stood a moment watching the retreating form of her young lover as he took his way with quick, swinging steps across the well-known fields where the young corn was standing, the hovering larks were singing. Something in the free, active, figure, with its look of youth and strength, seemed to bring to her a sense of protection and of courage. Her heart was beating with little hurried throbs as she crossed the farm threshold; but she went with lips compressed and head erect, down the cool echoing stone passage to the closed door, behind which she knew Miss Honoria and Mr. Barker were awaiting her.

They both looked up at her entrance. Miss Honoria was seated stiff and stern-faced by the open window; while the Rector of Saint Timothy, with a general air of limpness and depression, occupied the extreme edge of the big sofa at the further end of the room.

"Letitia," Miss Honoria began, and her voice trembled, not all with anger, "sit down, I want to speak to you. You are prepared to hear that I have learned from Mr. Barker what took place upon the beach this morning?"

At the mention of his name, the Rector gave a little uneasy cough, and got dangerously nearer the sofa's edge.

But Letitia did not look at him. She was standing by the table, where the white cloth was already spread, and neither moved nor spoke.

Miss Honoria went on: "I am willing to think that you were not aware of the full extent of the impropriety of your conduct. Of your deceit towards me I do not wish to speak. I have striven to do what I thought my duty, but it seems that I have failed. Perhaps it is my fault. Perhaps—" her voice broke.

Letitia could be hard no longer. "No, no," she cried, "it is not that, Aunt Honoria, it is not that! It is only that I—that we—love one another!"

The girl's voice softened; she put out her hands with a pretty tender motion. Miss Honoria fell back almost with a groan. "My poor Letitia! my poor little girl! Tell her, Mr. Barker. You know, you saw—tell her that no man acts like that towards the woman he respects."

But Mr. Barker only coughed again. Letitia almost broke into a little happy laugh. I am afraid it was not her young lover's respect she cared about. She wondered if poor Aunt Honoria had quite finished—if she might go upstairs now and prepare for dinner. She was preparing to move, when Miss Honoria spoke again. Her voice was quite steady now, and she spoke in her usual tone :

"Stay," she said. "One word more, and I have done with the subject for ever. Mr. Barker will kindly take a message in for me to-night, and to-morrow we return to Blickaton, to the old safe life it would have been better we had never left."

The quiet of the scarcely-trodden fields, the desolate shore, flashed upon Letitia—who had a little sense of humour—as Miss Honoria spoke. She was all but smiling. But Blickaton, and the old safe life there, called up by Miss Honoria, flashed upon her, too. The smile gave place to an irrepressible shiver.

The elder woman saw it with a little pang, also with a little sudden sense of fright.

"Letitia," she said, quite sternly, "we must understand one another. All this must be forgotten. I know nothing of this misguided young man whose acquaintance you have made; I do not wish to know. But remember, you and he have said good-bye to one another. There are to be no meetings in the future—no communication of any kind. I am going to forget all this folly on one condition—that you promise to do the same. And now, if you please, Letitia, we will have in dinner."

Letitia did not give the promise, for which Miss Honoria did not wait. The girl went from the room, not untouched, but thankful to escape. She did not want to hate Aunt Honoria, nor to be unfaithful to her, but she would not give up her lover. She would trust, and wait, as she had promised; that would wrong no one.

It was June now. The days dragged on heavily enough in the house in Silent Street; more heavily, even, than Letitia had pictured to herself their doing. The girl grew pale and thin, and did not care to stir. In the old-fashioned garden, where the June roses were blooming, and the blackbirds called and whistled in the pear-trees, Letitia would take her poor pretence of work, or a book, and sit for hours.

The elder woman watched the young girl anxiously, but told herself she could do nothing. Forgetfulness must come with time. Letitia had, in her youth and ignorance, done wrong; but what could be said for the other—for the man who knew the world, who, if he too were young, could not be ignorant? No, Miss Honoria told herself, the only happiness for the poor, foolish child, was to forget him.

But someone else was watching Letitia, too. Every Sunday Claude Ainslie made his way over to Blickaton, and took his place among the worshippers at Saint Timothy's. He sat in full face of the congregation, as also of the Rector and Miss Honoria—who knew very well who the young man must be—and stared boldly at poor Letitia every time she stood up. He saw the girl growing paler and thinner each week, and, at last, could bear it no longer. He would see Miss Honoria; she should admit him, should hear what he had to say, even if he had to break into the house in Silent Street, and compel its mistress to receive him.

One afternoon, when the rain had been falling all day, and he knew he should be likely to find Miss Strange at home, Claude knocked boldly and loudly at the forbidden door. He could hear the sound go echoing through the house as if in protest. It brought to him a middle-aged woman, who eyed him doubtfully.

"Can I see Miss Strange?" he asked.

The woman hesitated.

"I'm only the cook," she said at last. "I believe my mistress is out; but I can go and ask," and Claude found himself within the precincts. He looked round the roomy hall where the woman had left him while she departed on her errand. Doors opened into rooms on either side. He wondered if by chance his Letitia was in any one of them. He touched one of the doors gently; it yielded to his hand; but the room was empty. Then, emboldened, he crossed over to its fellow. This one was shut. He paused a moment. The young fellow's heart was hot within him. He was angry, indignant, anxious. If Fortune was bent on favouring him, why should he hesitate? Then he turned the handle and looked in. No one was there. The room was a large one, with windows facing the street; it also ran back and formed a smaller room, where was another window looking out upon the garden. This portion was not visible to the intruder where he stood. Letitia might be there.

Claude closed the door quietly behind him and stepped softly in. He could see into the smaller room quite well now. He never knew then, or in recalling the scene later on, whether it was moments or minutes that he stood rooted there, his gaze fixed, fascinated by what he saw.

It was not Letitia that he looked upon even now. It was Miss Honoria herself, by the window pale, agitated, supporting herself by the chair from which she had evidently just risen; while, at her feet, one knee upon the floor, his bald head flushed, his face betraying an agitation scarcely less than Miss Honoria's own, was the Rector of Saint Timothy.

There was no mistaking the situation. The stern, self-respecting woman, trembling, crushed, humiliated by her old friend's treachery—for to her it seemed even that. The little Rector, hurt, bewildered, scarcely realising the enormity of his crime, yet grieved and repentant.

Those moments, which had seemed minutes, brought back to Claude his wits. They told him he could not take himself too quickly or too quietly from the scene. Apologies and explanations must be for another day.

Miss Honoria had sunk into the chair by which she had been standing, and was shading her face with one trembling hand—was it Letitia's wan, accusing face she was trying to shut out?

The Rector, not without some difficulty, had risen to his feet. He looked at Claude a little ruefully as the young fellow crossed the room beside him on their way to the door.

Suddenly Miss Honoria's voice was heard calling from the inner room.

"It is you she wants," the Rector said, and then Letitia's lover turned hastily back.

No one ever knew what passed at that

interview. No whisper ever reached the world outside of the scene that had preceded it, not even to Letitia did her lover betray the secret of that afternoon.

The rain had ceased; the sun was once more shining, when Letitia found her way to the room in which the two were. The poor child came in, pale, languid, unexpectant. When she saw who it was standing there, she was pale, languid no longer; the old colour came rushing back, her eyes were radiant with the strange, sweet surprise. There was a moment of silence, of wonder, of delight; then, with a little cry, Letitia was in her lover's arms.

Spring was once more gone and over, and then, in the happy June weather, Claude and Letitia were married. The young people shared the house in Silent Street with Aunt Honoria, and never found it dull or gloomy.

Claude painted a good many pictures there, but I never heard that he made either a name or a fortune. I like to think that Miss Honoria forgave her old friend, the Rector of St. Timothy's, and that the old friendship was renewed, and continued unbroken to the end.

They have rested peacefully now for many a year side by side in the old grey church's shadow. Claude and Letitia rest there, too, and in Silent Street the name of Strange is not so much as remembered.

Time's changes have come to Blickston. They have come, too, to the little seaside spot where first the lovers met. Houses have sprung up, the Martello tower has gone; but, down by the wide stretching sea, the restless waves come sweeping in, and break and murmur as of old.

The May sun shines, a little breeze comes rippling by; it might have been but yesterday Letitia and her lover wandered there.

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